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Populism and Industrialism: The Ideology of the Official Organ of the Nebraska Populist Movement

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POPULISM AND INDUSTRIALISM
THE IDEOLOGY OF THE OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE NEBRASKA POPULIST MOVEMENT

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is perhaps a commentary on the current state of affairs that I dedicate this piece of academic work to a group of individuals and an organization unrelated to academia. Unfortunately, the University today is not the realm of intellectual stimulation that it should be; certainly this is regrettable, hopefully it is not inevitable. I dedicate this piece to that organization, under whose auspices I received my real intellectual training: The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee.

An education is more than just the accumulation of knowledge, it is also the process of defining the larger purposes to which that knowledge shall be used. Development of the skills and techniques necessary to use that knowledge toward those ends is equally important. Needless to say, the University today has slighted these aspects of education.

At the time I came into contact with it, the summer of 1964, The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was engaged in an effort to transform, in a more just and democratic direction, not only the state of Mississippi, but the entire United States as well. It

brought to that task a humanistic faith in the powers of tolerance, rationality and the democratic process. For its efforts, SNCC was destroyed.

In retrospect, one can fault SNCC only for naivete. It underestimated the depth and ferocity of racism in this country, particularly the kind of racism that masquerades behind liberal caution and institutional bureaucratism. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee offered this country the best that human beings are likely to offer. Any country that so brutally destroys such a gift needs more than just change, it needs purification, by whatever means necessary. Someday . . .

Returning to the more mundane aspects of this piece, I should like to thank my advisor William C. Pratt who suggested the topic and provided insistent and probing questions throughout my work on it.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE LITERATURE OF POPULISM AND INDUSTRIALISM

After nearly forty years, John D. Hicks' The Populist Revolt remains the standard work on Populism.[1] Despite the shortcomings of ignoring the international economic context and a tendency to accept at face value the Populists' complaints, it is the best one-volume of political history of the movement. In addition, it established the interpretive framework in which the subject has been viewed. This framework consists of two components, the agrarian and the retrogressive contexts. Populism was a political reform movement led by economically distressed farmers in the south and midwest, joined by the western silver states, that sprung from the peculiar social and economic conditions of those regions in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.[2]

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[1] John D. Hicks, The Populist Revolt, Bison Books (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1961).

[2] The most comprehensive survey of agricultural economics in the period is Fred A. Shannon, The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860-1897, The Economic History of the United States, Volume V (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

No one who has written subsequently has seriously challenged the agrarian context, although some, including Hicks himself, have suggested that this aspect is somewhat overemphasized in The Populist Revolt. John Hicks has confessed that he was at that time, writing under the spell of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and would correct the imbalance were he writing today.[3] The Populists were almost exclusively farmers at the rank and file level, and especially those involved in wheat and cotton farming which had suffered a steady fall in prices. The silver interests joined the movement because their product was in a similar predicament of overproduction and low prices.

More controversial has been Hicks' retrogressive context. Building on Turner's conception of the 1890's as a major watershed in American history, he wrote that the Populist movement was "the last phase of a long and perhaps losing struggle, the struggle to save agricultural America from the devouring jaws of industrial America."[4] It was a defensive movement to preserve and maintain the prerogatives

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[3]John D. Hicks, "Our Pioneer Heritage: A Reconsideration," Prairie Schooner, XXX (Winter, 1956), 359-61. James C. Malin, in an early review essay, criticized Hicks for taking the Populists' complaints at face value and for ignoring the international economic context. James C. Malin, "Notes on the Literature of Populism," Kansas Historical Quarterly, I (February, 1932), 160-4.

[4]Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 237.

of the agrarian sector. Though the Populists lost this battle, according to Hicks, they contributed significantly to America's political development by refreshing the political dialogue, introducing the idea that the federal government had a responsibility for the welfare of economically distressed groups and proposing numerous reforms that were adopted in later years by other political groups.[5]

The essential themes established by Hicks were reworked by Richard Hofstadter in The Age of Reform, perhaps the most influential recent book on the subject.[6] Whereas Hicks had presented a sympathetic picture of the movement as a rational though bitter protest against legitimate economic and political grievances, Hofstadter sought to bring out the darker, more irrational side. His basic thesis is that the farmers were guilty of a grand self-deception, taking as their own self-image an agrarian ideal that had nothing to do with the commercial realities of their situation. The "agrarian myth," according to Hofstadter, originated as a literary conceit developed by non-agrarian writers. It posited that the agrarian way of

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[5] Ibid., pp. 404-23. See also John D. Hicks, "The Legacy of Populism in the Western Middle West," Agricultural History, XXIII (October, 1949), 225-36.

[6] Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R., Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1955).

life was fundamentally more "natural" and hence more noble than other modes of life. The yeoman farmer was independent and virtuous.[7]

American agriculture, Hofstadter continued, had originally been of the small, yeoman variety, but increasingly became more commercialized. As they became more heavily involved in the complex economic world, the farmers also became increasingly nostalgic about the lost age of innocence. Thus, their political movement, Populism, was characterized by an irrational desire to turn the clock back to a utopia that lay in the past. Hofstadter faults the agrarians on two counts: for wanting to turn the clock back, and for seeking the return to an age that never existed in the first place.[8]

Unfortunately, The Age of Reform, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 and has been enormously influential, suffers from a serious imbalance of emphasis. The author, following Hicks, acknowledges the substantial contributions of the movement:

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[7] Ibid., pp. 23-46. For a survey of the image of agrarianism see, Paul H. Johnstone, "Old Ideals versus New Ideas in Farm Life," Department of Agriculture, Farmers in a Changing World, Yearbook of Agriculture, 1940 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1940, pp. 111-70.

[8] Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 60-93.

> Populism was the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States to insist that the federal government has some responsibility for the common weal; indeed, it was the first such movement to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism.[9]

Yet, he passes quickly to what he considers the "unseen blemishes in their record," particularly the themes of provincialism, nativism, nationalism and anti-semitism.[10] While his judgements are scrupulously qualified, the qualifications, like his larger tribute, are lost in the general indictment. The Age of Reform has thus become both the symptom and cause of a reinterpretation of Populism, on the basis of themes almost unique to that book. A large body of literature has appeared on the themes of Populist responsibility for anti-semitism, nationalism, nativism and fascism.[11]

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[9] Ibid., p. 61.

[10] Ibid.

[11] An unflattering image of Populism has been developed by: Daniel Bell, ed., The New American Right (New York: Criterion Books, 1955): Victor C. Ferkiss, "Populist Influences on American Fascism," Western Political Quarterly, X (June, 1957), 350-373; and, Oscar Handlin, "Reconsidering the Populists," Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965), 68-74. Defending the reputation of the Populists are: C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," The American Scholar, XXIX (Winter, 1959-1960), 55-73; Norman Pollack, "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism," American Historical Review, LXVIII (October, 1962), 76-80; and, Walter T. K. Nugent, The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

The Age of Reform has, however, been subjected to severe criticism of both its conclusions and its methodology. William Appleman Williams established the basic themes of this critique in a review essay prompted by the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to the Hofstadter book. He accuses the author of "re-forming" history, in the sense of reshaping it to fit the prevailing political mood of the 1950's. To accomplish this feat, he continues, Hofstadter had to abandon the analysis of specific men and movements (which contributed to his excellent The American Political Tradition) and formulate ideal social types and fit them into neat categories.[12]

Theodore Saloutos amplified the former criticism, pointing out that the debates of the 1950's reflected the preoccupations of the scholars, notably McCarthyism, rather than the concerns of the nineteenth century agrarians.[13] Norman Pollack, in a series of articles, a book and an anthology of Populist writings, has continued the criticism of Hofstadter and attempted to reconstruct the image of

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[12] William Appleman Williams, "The Age of Re-forming History," The Nation, CLXXXII (June 30, 1956), 552-554.

[13] Theodore Saloutos, "The Professors and the Populists," Agricultural History, XL (October, 1966), 235-254.

Populism.[14] His most ambitious effort is his book, reworked from his doctoral dissertation, entitled The Populist Response to Industrial America. This provocative essay goes far beyond what even the most sympathetic scholars have claimed for the movement. Its conclusions are:

> Populism was a progressive social force. It accepted industrial society, posed solutions not seeking to turn back the clock, and was strongly pro-labor. Yet, the movement was progressive in still a more profound sense. Not only did Populism look forward rather than backward, but it was deeply committed to freedom. It attacked the very character of industrial capitalist society, not only on economic, but also humanistic grounds. . . . The issue at stake was nothing less than human dignity. . . . Industrial America must be altered in a truly democratic direction.[15]

In one bold stroke, Pollack not only challenged Richard Hofstadter's critical view of the movement, but also the basic retrogressive framework established by John D. Hicks. Populism was not the last stand of agriculture against industrialism, but rather an attempt to meet it on its own terms and transform it in a more democratic direction. Pollack's book not only transcended the narrow debates

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[14] Norman Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism: A Critique of The Age of Reform," Journal of Southern History, XXVI (November, 1960), 478-500; "The Myth of Populist Anti-Semitism;" "Fear of Man: Populism, Authoritarianism and the Historian," Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965), 59-85; The Populist Response to Industrial America, The Norton Library (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966); The Populist Mind, The American Heritage Series (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967).

[15] Pollack, Populist Response, p. 143.

of the 1950's, but also the outlook of scholars sympathetic to Populism and charted a new direction for investigation of the subject.[16]

At first glance, it might appear that Norman Pollack is simply committing the same sin of "present-mindedness" as the scholars of the 1950's he sought to revise. The themes of The Populist Response -- grass-roots radicalism, quasi-Marxism, the conservatism of organized labor, the sectarianism of official Marxist groups, and the theme of alienation -- are the preoccupations of young radicals of the 1960's.[17] It would be wrong, however, to dismiss the book on mere prima facie evidence for it is highly provocative and demands consideration on its own terms. The author invites a serious examination of his thesis, for in his bibliographical essay he makes assertions about his

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[16] Other major works, basically sympathetic to Populism are: C. Vann Woodward, Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel (New York: MacMillan, 1938); Theodore Saloutos, Farmer Movements in the South, 1865-1933, Bison Books (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1964); Robert F. Durden, The Climax of Populism (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966); Nugent, Tolerant Populists.

[17] This point is made by Irwin Unger, "Critique of Norman Pollack's 'Fear of Man,'" Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965), 75-80. Robert F. Durden has criticized The Populist Response on a number of grounds: 1) that it limits itself to midwestern Populism; 2) that if they were as radical as Pollack makes them out to be, what becomes of the Southern Populists who were generally more radical than their midwestern counterparts; and, 3) Pollack's use of the Lloyd papers. Robert F. Durden, review of The Populist Response to Industrial America by Norman Pollack, Mississippi Valley Historical Review, L (June, 1963), 138-140.

source material as extravagant as any he makes about the Populists themselves. Nine-tenths of the material used for his book, he claims, has never been used before, even though perfectly available to scholars.[18] On the basis of such allegedly virgin source material he rests his revisionist thesis.

While he advances a radical interpretation, Pollack is not the first scholar to deal with the inter-relationship of Populism and industrialism. Hicks viewed the movement as a defensive reaction to a rising industrial order and Hofstadter credited it with being the first relevant political movement to deal with the effects of industrialism. These two scholars, however, have not pursued the subject further. Theodore Saloutos, on the other hand, has investigated the subject in a series of articles and emphasizes its importance. "To me," he writes, "the impact of the industrial revolution on agriculture is a subject of primary importance."[19] While most scholars have recognized the impact of industrialism on agriculture, particularly in terms of the application of

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[18] Pollack, Populist Response, p. 145.

[19] Saloutos, "Professors," 252. See also Theodore Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem and Nineteenth Century Industrialism," Agricultural History, XXII (July, 1948), 156-174; "Land Policy and its Relation to Agricultural Production and Distribution, 1862-1933," Journal of Economic History, XXII (December, 1962), 445-460.

technology, Saloutos reverses the perspective and stresses the impact of the resulting gains in productivity upon world-wide industrial development.

Briefly stated, his view is that the increased productivity of American agriculture hastened the industrialization of both America and Western Europe, by providing the foodstuffs necessary for urbanization. Later, as the United States became less dependent upon European manufactures and erected higher tariffs, Europe retaliated by looking elsewhere for her agricultural needs, particularly Canada, Argentina and Russia. The American agrarians, however, did not understand these profound changes that were taking place. One of the basic components of Saloutos' interpretation is a skeptical view of the Populists' complaints. He finds, for instance, that lower interest rates would only have encouraged further expansion and thereby have aggravated the problem of overproduction. Similarly, if railroad rates, which had been dropping steadily in the nineteenth century, had dropped still further, it would have shrunk the world market and increased competition more critically.[20] Saloutos'

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[20] Saloutos, "Land Policy," pp. 454-455; Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem," pp. 163-164. The Populists views on the interest problem have also been critically examined by Allan Bogue, Money At Interest: The Farm Mortgage on the Middle Border (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1955).

conclusion is that the subject of American agriculture's involvement in world economics and industrialism is one that needs further research.[21]

The work of another scholar who has examined Populism's relationship to American industrialism, Chester MacArthur Destler, has been rather neglected. A group of his essays, published as American Radicalism, 1865-1901, investigate two particular aspects of the subject.[22] The first essay in that collection, "Western Radicalism: Concepts and Origins," argues that Populism constituted a synthesis of reform ideas that had been circulating for a number of years and were eastern and urban in origin. Perhaps the neglect of Destler's work may be attributed to the fact that he stands so far outside the context of frontier agrarianism that other scholars on the subject have used.[23]

In three other essays, Destler examines the labor-Populist coalition that was forged in 1894.[24] The subject

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[21] Saloutos, "Professors," 252.

[22] Chester MacArthur Destler, American Radicalism, 1865-1901, Quandrangle Paperbacks (Chicago: Quandrangle Books, 1966).

[23] Ibid., pp. 1-31.

[24] Ibid., pp. 162-254.

of the Populist movement's attitude toward urban labor, organized or unorganized, is necessarily an important part of their larger response to industrialism. Destler makes no attempt to generalize about Populism as a whole, however, from his examination of the Illinois situation. He does point out that Illinois was a unique setting which brought together midwestern agriculture and the large metropolis of Chicago.[25] To point out the obvious, Illinois was not a Populist stronghold and no Populist state had the equivalent of a Chicago within its borders. Equally important to the uniqueness of the Illinois situation was the vigorous role played by Henry Demarest Lloyd in promoting the coalition. While he was active in the Populist movement, there is serious question as to whether he can be considered at all representative.

The uniqueness of the Illinois situation needs to be stressed, for it appears that Norman Pollack has based much of The Populist Response upon Destler's work. One of the key points of his thesis is that the Populists were vigorously pro-labor; furthermore, he recommends Destler in his bibliographical essay and acknowledges that he himself relied heavily on the Lloyd papers.[26] More serious is the fact that

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[25] Ibid., p. 162.

[26] Pollack, Populist Response, pp. 145-146.

Pollack has used a quote from Lloyd to serve as the title of the first chapter and as the theme of the entire book.[27] If Lloyd is not representative of Populism as a whole, and Pollack almost seems to make that admission, then the conclusions reached by The Populist Response may be open to question.[28]

Despite the obvious use he has made of Destler, Pollack reaches completely different conclusions on one crucial aspect of the subject, Populist ideology. Pollack argues that "Populism did not subscribe to the ideologies of individualism, competition, and progress."[29] Destler and virtually every other scholar who has investigated the subject has concluded that the Populists were agrarian capitalists whose program was aimed at restoring the competitive position of the small individual entrepreneur.[30] Pollack argues, however, that the Populists transcended the

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[27] ". . . the fullness of the divinity of humanity," ibid., p. 13.

[28] Referring to the Lloyd papers, Pollack writes, "Also, because Lloyd and his correspondents were more concerned with national and even philosophic issues than was Populism as a whole, penetrating criticisms occur having value beyond their use as evidence." Ibid., p. 146.

[29] Ibid., p. 23.

[30] Destler, American Radicalism, p. 20; Populist Revolt, p. 422; Woodward, Tom Watson, p. 217; Durden, Climax of Populism, p. 3; Nugent, Tolerant Populists, p. 95; Benton H. Wilcox, "An Historical Definition of Northwestern Radicalism," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXVI (December, 1939), 377-394.

prevailing ideologies of the time and, "Had Populism succeeded it could have fundamentally altered American society in a socialistic direction."[31]

To a certain extent, Pollack's thesis must be seen as an attack upon the prevailing consensus school of American historiography. By making the Populists socialistic, he is able to deny the alleged "uniqueness of America." His purposes on this point are revealed in his chapter entitled "Philosophic Digression," in which he discusses the similarities between Populism and Marxism. While denying that they are the same thing, he does go to great lengths to argue that they arose from similar economic situations.[32] The question of the uniqueness of America is one that need not concern us in this essay. Populist ideology, however, is of prime concern. Norman Pollack stands virtually alone in denying that the Populists shared the prevailing ideologies of the period. Oddly, the one other historian who tends to deviate from this consensus is Richard Hofstadter. Insofar as Hofstadter argues that the Populists were motivated by an "agrarian myth," he is placing them outside the commercial ethos. His point is that after the failure of

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[31]Pollack, Populist Response, p. 12.

[32]Ibid., pp. 82-83.

Populism, the agrarians owned up to their commercialism and got down to the business of dealing with it realistically.[33]

Norman Pollack's introduction of the theme of "alienation" raises the question of whether or not the Populists saw that American society was being fundamentally changed by industrialism. Pollack answers that they did and that their program was designed to deal with this reality.[34] In various ways, the different scholars have accepted the "watershed" interpretation of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Most, however, like John Hicks, have been working within the framework established by Frederick Jackson Turner. Even Richard Hofstadter, by arguing that Populism was the dying gasp of the agrarian myth, fits into this group. These historians have understood the watershed in terms of the relative status of the agrarian and industrial sectors. Pollack's understanding of it is something else altogether, emphasizing the changing nature of work itself and the consequent dehumanization of men. The present essay will attempt to explore the extent to which the Populists did indeed perceive their times as a major watershed.

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[33] Hofstadter, Age of Reform, pp. 60-130.

[34] Pollack, Populist Response, p. 84.

Finally, there is the question of program. As Pollack has suggested, the test of intellectual history is its ability to establish the relationship between thought and action, or in the words of another historian, between rhetoric and reality.[35] Pollack's essay, despite his own criticisms of Richard Hofstadter's methodology, is highly ahistorical in the sense that it does not investigate specific issues and the programs designed to deal with them. Several historians have criticized the book for its apparently cavalier use of rhetorical flourishes. Challenging Pollack's attempt to make the Populists socialistic, Christopher Lasch has written:

> /since/ Populist and Marxist rhetoric sometimes coincided . . . some historians have concluded from this rhetorical coincidence that the Populist critique of capitalism, though arrived at independently, was essentially the same as the socialist critique. . . . This conclusion . . . rests almost entirely on verbal correspondences; it is arrived at by piecing together a series of quotations abstracted from their context and treated with equal weight, without regard for speaker or occasion, so as to form a wholly synthetic system which is then attributed to the Populists themselves.[36]

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[35] J. Rogers Hollingsworth, "Populism: The Problem of Rhetoric and Reality," Agricultural History, XXXIX (April, 1965), 81-85.

[36] Christopher Lasch, The Agony of the American Left (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 5-6.

Along the same lines, Irwin Unger has pointed out that what was radical about Marxism was its program, not its critique.[37] An analysis of Populist thought, then, must examine critically the relationship between rhetoric and political program.

The following essay proposes to examine the Populist response to industrialism by means of a content analysis of the official organ of the Nebraska Populist movement. In his bibliographical essay, Norman Pollack highly recommends the newspaper collection in the Nebraska State Historical Society and cites the Lincoln Farmers' Alliance "as the proper starting place."[38] A cursory glance at his footnotes reveals that he has made generous use of this source in The Populist Response.

This paper was originally founded as the Alliance in 1889 under the authorization of the Executive Committee of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance.[39] It continued to serve as the official organ of that organization and, in later

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[37]Unger, "Critique of 'Fear of Man,'" p. 78.

[38]Pollack, Populist Response, p. 148.

[39]Nebraska Farmers' Alliance Papers, 1887-1901 (Microfilm Edition, Douglas A Bakken, ed.), roll #3, frame 3062, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

years, assumed the same role for the state Independent Peoples Party. During the decade under consideration from 1889 to 1900, the paper underwent numerous changes of title, ownership, editorship and format. Some confusion may result from the fact that it appeared under five different names. Nevertheless, there is little question but that it was the same paper. Consecutive numbering was continued throughout and it never lost its designation as the official organ.[40]

The various names under which it appeared, with their inclusive dates are as follows:[41]

Alliance. June 12, 1889-December 7, 1890.

Farmers' Alliance. December 14, 1890-March 30, 1892.

Alliance-Independent. April 7, 1892-March 8, 1894.

Wealth Makers. March 15, 1894-January 9, 1896.

Nebraska Independent. January 16-April 12, 1900.

Theodore Saloutos has pointed out some of the hazards of using newspapers as source material. Newspapers were the

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[40] Useful background on the history of the newspaper is available in Clifford Ernest Bowman, "The Populist Press of Nebraska, 1888-1896," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska, 1936); "The Local Nebraska Press and National Politics," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1964). The Alliance did establish a separate monthly paper in 1895, The Prairie Home, but it remained small and insignificant as the organization was moribund by this time. See Douglas A. Bakken, "Luna E. Kellie and the Farmers' Alliance," Nebraska History, L (Summer, 1969), 185-206. See also scattered items in the Farmers' Alliance Papers.

[41] The variety of names raises certain problems for a study of this sort in terms of making references. The following procedure, therefore has been adopted. References to

private organs of their owners and frequently expressed personal points of view, despite statuses of "official organ."[42] Thus, the conclusions reached in this essay must necessarily be greatly qualified. No claim is made to having captured the entire voice of Nebraska Populism. The source used is exclusive and admittedly elitist: the conclusions reached represent only that. Any generalizations drawn from the conclusions are speculative.

The validity of Saloutos' warning is borne out by the evidence of the Alliance. Between 1889 and early 1892 it became the personal organ of its editor Jay Burrows. Burrows had been a leading figure in farmer movements for some years. He was President of the National (Northern) Farmers Alliance and had been largely responsible for the success of the Nebraska Alliance.[43] On the basis of these activities, it is reasonable to conclude that he was representative of midwestern agrarianism. According to Clifford Bowman, "Mr. Burrows can be said to have been The Farmers'

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specific items will be cited according to the name of the paper at that particular time. General references will use the original name, Alliance. The only exception to this will be occasional use of Wealth Makers to refer in general to George Gibson's newspaper.

[42] Saloutos, "Professors," p. 245.

[43] Bowman's two works contain much useful background on Burrows, as does John Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 117-118.

Alliance."[44] Thus, under Burrows, the paper was probably representative of the movement as a whole.

George Howard Gibson, who edited the paper from October, 1893 through January, 1896, however, presents an entirely different situation. A devout Christian Socialist, Gibson left a personal stamp on the paper no less indelible than did Jay Burrows.[45] Serious questions can be raised as to whether the official organ of the Nebraska Populist movement was at all representative under the editorship of George Gibson.

An examination of the records of the paper would have been of undoubted value for this study. With the exception of a few scattered items in the Nebraska Farmers Alliance Papers, however, none seem to exist. The paper suffered a disastrous fire in 1899 and, presumably, its records were destroyed at that time.[46]

For the sake of perspective, other Populist newspapers have been surveyed; specifically, the county papers recommended by Norman Pollack: Beacon (Broken Bow, Nebraska),

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[44] Bowman, "The Populist Press," p. 35.

[45] For Background on George Gibson and Christian Socialism see: James Dombrowski, The Early Days of Christian Socialism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), particularly pp. 132-170; and, Howard H. Quint, The Forging of American Socialism (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953), pp. 103-141.

[46] Independent, September 21, 1899.

New Era (Wahoo, Nebraska), Argus (Columbus, Nebraska). The most striking contrast found between the Lincoln state organ and the local papers is that the former contains considerably more material to work with, particularly of the longer theoretical articles so necessary to an intellectual study. No serious deviations in political outlook were detected.

A final qualification is in order. The following essay proposes to study one particular newspaper's response to industrialism: what it saw, how it interpreted it and the political program it formulated. It is an attempt to look through the lens of the official organ of Nebraska Populism in order to recapture its image of the world it lived in. The first object of this essay, then, should be the faithful re-creation of that image. It will, at the same time however, attempt to avoid the pitfall of adopting uncritically the point of view of its subject.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY YEARS

ISSUES AND IDEOLOGY, 1889-1893

Through the decade of the 1880's, agriculture in Nebraska, as in other midwestern states, experienced a tremendous expansion. This boom, however, was built on an unstable foundation of abnormally high rainfall and excessive land speculation. In 1887 the bubble burst and by 1889 Nebraska farmers, spurred by a severe drought, were in political revolt.[1]

The principle farmers organization in the state, the Farmers' Alliance, had grown slowly to a total of 403 local sub-alliances by the end of 1888. The following year it more than doubled and in 1890 it doubled again. By 1891 it claimed over 2,000 local chapters with more than 50,000 members. The momentum generated by this growth, coupled with the severity of the economic distress, drove the Alliance toward political action. The creation of a

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[1]The relationship of the boom and bust to Populism is detailed in Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 1-152; for a more extensive treatment of American agriculture see Shannon, Farmers' Last Frontier, pp. 291-328; for Nebraska see James C. Olson, History of Nebraska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), pp. 195-220.

newspaper as an official organ was a logical and necessary step in that direction.[2]

Officially, the organization was committed to a program of non-partisan educational work. The first issue of the Alliance announced a policy of remaining independent in politics.[3] A resolution of the Executive Committee of the Alliance, dated September 10, 1889, however, set forth an ambiguous policy. Political action was needed, because "every public question in this country is a political question, in a certain sense, and relief . . . must come through political action." On the other hand, it pointed out that previous efforts in politics had resulted in disaster for the organization. Individual members could engage in politics, but not the organization itself. "Take politics into the Alliance all you please, but do not take the Alliance into politics," it cautioned its members.[4]

The new mood, however, could not be contained within these limited bounds. Increasingly, the farmers understood

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[2]Nebraska Farmers' Alliance Papers, 1887-1901, Roll #3, frames 3169-3230. The history of the Alliance is detailed in John D. Barnhart, "A History of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance and the Peoples Party," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1929).

[3]"Salutatory," Alliance, June 12, 1889.

[4]"The Alliance and Politics," ibid., September 28, 1889. The Alliance had been active in the formation of an anti-monopoly party in the 1880's and the organization had suffered seriously as a result. Barnhart, "History," pp. 163-173.

their problems in terms of social policy. Special interest legislation permitted the accumulation of great wealth in the hands of a few.[5] These individuals were not inherently evil, for: "It is not the money loaners, the land grabber, and the railroad monopolist that hurts, but the law which permits them to live."[6] Who was to blame for this situation? A correspondent to the Alliance replied: "The farmer, laborer, and workingman alone," for permitting the monopoly power to control politics. Relief would come through the organized pursuit of the farmers' own self-interest.[7]

With the reorganization of the Alliance under the editorial direction of Jay Burrows in October, 1889, the paper moved more boldly in the direction of political action. Burrows was president of the National (Northern) Farmers Alliance and had been largely responsible for the success of the state Alliance. Though personally committed to working within the existing two-party structure, his fiery editorials contributed significantly to the drive

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[5]"The Limitation of Wealth," Alliance, June 26, 1889.

[6]Editorial, ibid., August 7, 1889.

[7]Letter from H. B., "Who is to Blame?," ibid. "Atomized man gave way to social man, individual responsibility to social responsibility. Society, not the individual had to be changed." Pollack, Populist Response, p. 24.

toward independent political action.[8] The second issue under his direction carried, for the first time, a complete political platform. This document, which contained the essentials of the 1892 Omaha Platform, appeared prominently in the top left-hand corner of the front page and remained there unchanged for over four months.[9]

While the platform stressed the three issues of money, land and transportation that were to become the Populist creed, a careful reading of the Alliance through the early years (1889-1892) leaves no doubt but that the money question was paramount.[10] Jay Burrows concluded a major three-part article by saying: "Is it not apparent, then, that the money question transcends in importance all other questions . . . ?"[11] In 1889 he published thirteen major items on the money question, compared to five on

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[8] Bowman, "The Populist Press," p. 53; Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 117-118.

[9] Alliance, October 12, 1889.

[10] The evidence of the Alliance tends to confirm Irwin Unger's opinion that if you "eliminate the money question from the Populist platform . . . you have virtually reduced it to its peripheral issues." Unger, "Critique of 'Fear of Man,'" 76.

[11] Jay Burrows, "A Reply to the Century Magazine," Farmers' Alliance, January 7, 1892.

corporations and monopolies. The following year, however, the ratio was reversed with eight items on money and thirteen on monopolies.[12]

As John Hicks points out in The Populist Revolt, the "money question" meant different things to various groups within the Populist movement.[13] To the more radical members, those Hicks calls the "genuine Populists," the money question involved a re-definition of money itself and major changes in the national money system. With unflagging persistence, the Alliance expounded the catechism: money was the creation of law with no intrinsic value. As an artificial representation of wealth with the sole function of serving as a medium of exchange, it could be made of any material. The medium used and the amount in circulation could be changed by common consent.[14] Men were not the passive victims of a natural money system, but the masters of their own monetary fate.

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[12]Other expressions of the primacy of the money question include: "The Memorial," Alliance, June 12, 1889; "Petition," ibid., February 22, 1890; "Declaration of Principles," ibid., May 17, 1890; "We Must Agree," Farmers' Alliance, May 14, 1891.

[13]Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 315-317.

[14]Expressions of this definition of money are: "The Great Issue," Alliance, June 26, 1889; "The Farmers' Demand for Cheap Money," ibid., October 4, 1890; "What is Money?" Alliance-Independent, November 24, 1892; "What is Money?," ibid., December 8, 1892. Educational materials used by the Farmers' Alliance took the form of a rote drill. A sheet of paper carried the following questions, each followed by a

It followed, then, that the people, through the national government, should control the national money system. The Omaha Platform demanded a national currency, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, an increase in the volume of currency in circulation, an income tax and a system of postal savings banks.[15]

Inflation was, for many Populists, the key item on the agenda. The crisis of the 1890's, in this view, was the result of a reduction in the per capita volume of currency in circulation. Contraction, as they called it, worked a particularly severe hardship on farmers and the western region. They saw a shrinking volume raising the value of the individual dollar and lowering prices.[16] Contraction was responsible for the steady decline of farm prices and the remedy was an increase in the per capita volume to a level of $50. In arriving at this figure, their model was clearly the inflationary period of the Civil War. Figures which they cited in support of their demand showed that such a

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blank space for the appropriate answer: "1. What is Money? 2. What is its relation to wealth? 3. By whom should it be created? 4. Of what material should it be made? 5. How much ought to be created?" Farmers' Alliance Papers, Roll #3, frame 3110.

[15]The Omaha Platform, July, 1892. See Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 439-444.

[16]The contraction thesis is argued in: "Contraction," Alliance-Independent, October 20, 1892; "Has There Been a Contraction of the Currency?," Alliance, December 14, 1889. It is also contained, in one form or another, in most of the articles on money previously cited.

level had been reached only in those years.[17]

It was an article of faith with the Alliance that inflation would solve both the problem of low farm prices and that of oppressive interest payments. A cheaper dollar would automatically raise the price of farm goods.[18] Related to this was the matter of overproduction. Jay Burrows declared it a "heresy" that overproduction was the cause of low farm prices and asserted that "it is a financial axiom that prices of products bear a certain relation to the volume of money in circulation."[19] Similarly, inflation would ease the mortgage crisis. John Hicks presents a succinct exposition of the Populists' views on this matter. With an

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[17] The per capita volume of money for selected years:

1854 - $17.04
1862 - 22.69
1864 - 58.72
1866 - 52.01
1879 - 17.02
1890 - 21.66

Cited in "Contraction," Alliance-Independent, October 20, 1892. Overproduction is refuted in "Overproduction," Alliance, November 9, 1889; "Why Price of Farm Products Have Declined," ibid., January 9, 1890.

[18] "The Philosophy of Price," Alliance, July 10, 1889. "A Cause for Depression in Agriculture," from National Economist, ibid., September 21, 1889, with the editorial comment that "the above from the Economist is in the main correct."

[19] Burrows, "Money: Does Contraction of the Currency Lower Prices?," Part I, ibid., October 12, 1889; Part II, October 19, 1889.

appreciating dollar, the farmer was paying back (irrespective of interest charges) more in terms of farm produce than he had borrowed.[20]

The more radical side of Populism rejected mere inflationism and sought to restructure the national financial system. In this view, the plutocrats of the east were siphoning off the wealth of the "producers" through interest, rent and profits. The demonic "money power" included eastern bankers, corporations and European financiers.[21] Ultimately, the inflationists would dominate the Populist movement and, in turn, inflation would mean merely the free and unlimited coinage of silver. As John Hicks points out, the inflationists preferred paper money as the proper means to their end

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[20]Contained in most of the articles on money previously cited--see Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 89. Allan Bogue and Theodore Saloutos have challenged Hicks' uncritical acceptance of the Populists' views on the interest problem. According to Bogue, the practices of the eastern speculators were characterized more by folly than malice. Saloutos concurs and adds that lower interest rates would only have encouraged further expansion, thereby aggravating the already serious problem of overproduction. Bogue, Money At Interest; Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem," 163.

[21]Distinctions between the different aspects of Populism on the money question are not always precisely defined; thus, Burrows could emphasize different points at different times. Expressions of more radical views of the money question are: "The Farmers' Demand for Cheap Money: Interest the Great Accumulator," by Jay Burrows, Alliance, October 11, 1890; "The Balance of Trade Fallacy," Farmers' Alliance, February 25, 1892; The Reason For It," ibid., November 19, 1891; "Government Banking," Alliance-Independent, May 12, July 7, 1892; "Confronting the Money Power," ibid., April 21, 1892.

and regarded silver as inadequate. For political reasons, however, silver would become the dominant motif of Populism beginning in 1893.[22] A precise distinction should be made, then, between the "money question" and the "silver issue." The former included a variety of reforms, of which silver was only one. There is no question but that the original money question was the paramount issue for the Alliance prior to 1893.

The paper expressed confidence that inflation would solve the problems of other economic groups besides the farmers. Urban workingmen would benefit because a rise in prices would bring a rise in wages: "One of the first things to go up, when prices are booming, is wages. . . . there is no class more rapidly and surely benefitted by a raise in prices than the laborer."[23] A succinct expression of its views on the relationship between the farmer and the laborer was, "the labor question is the money question."[24] Businessmen would also benefit. The Alliance published a "Standing

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[22]". . . after 1892, this purpose /economic relief/ was alloyed to some degree with the desire of the party to perpetuate itself as a political organism." Nugent, Tolerant Populists, p. 232.

[23]"Labor Needs a Sound Currency," Farmers' Alliance September 10, 1891.

[24]"Strikes Everywhere," Alliance, April 26, 1890.

Appeal to Businessmen," advising them that inflation would put money in the hands of their customers and generally stimulate production.[25] The available evidence tends to confirm Richard Hofstadter's analysis of the Populist belief in a natural harmony of interests between the various producing classes. Class antagonisms, as they viewed it, existed only between the great mass of producers on the one hand and a small group of plutocrats who did not "produce" but merely extracted wealth from others by means of interest, rent and profits.[26]

Attacks on the plutocrats were highly rhetorical and the difference between radical rhetoric and a radical program is illustrated by the Alliance's handling of the railroad problem. On the state level, this was a more tangible issue for the Nebraska Independents than the money question. A solution to the latter, after all, would have to wait for Populist control of the federal government; the railroads could be regulated by the state legislature

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[25] "A Standing Appeal to Businessmen," Farmers' Alliance, November 19, 26, 1891.

[26] "To the Populist mind there was no fundamental conflict between the farmer and the worker, between toiling people and the small businessman. While there might be corrupt individuals in any group, the underlying interests of the productive majority were the same; predatory behavior existed only because it was initiated and underwritten by a small parasitic minority in the highest places of power." Hofstadter, Age of Reform, p. 64.

which came under Independent control in 1891. The Newberry Bill, to regulate rates, was a major issue in Nebraska for nearly eight years. Initially passed in 1891 and vetoed by the Democratic Governor, it became law two years later. The railroads immediately obtained an injunction, however, and in 1898 the United States Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional.[27]

Significantly, the Newberry Bill was an attempt to regulate and not assume control of the railroads. The model used for the rate schedule was the one in effect in neighboring Iowa which was considerably lower.[28] Even more indicative of the limits of Populist radicalism on this matter is the fact that the Alliance justified lower rates on the grounds that high rates damaged local industries.[29] The Newberry Bill was an attempt to reform the business system in order to provide greater opportunity for entrepreneurs, not to alter the system by doing away with capitalism. Regulation

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[27] A summary history of the Newberry Bill is in Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 283-284. A survey of legislation of the period is in William F. Zimmerman, "A Legislative History of Nebraska Populism, 1890-1895," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1926).

[28] Letter, N. Ashby, Alliance, March 29, 1890.

[29] "High Local Rates," Alliance-Independent, February 16, 1893.

was a rational response to a severe problem, but a rational response should not be confused with a radical one.[30]

The railroads were a political as well as an economic problem for the Nebraska Independents. The money power, they cried, was using its wealth to corrupt the political process and thwart the will of the people. The Alliance believed that the Gubernatorial election of 1890 had been stolen from the Independents by ballot-box stuffing which it termed the "Omaha Plan."[31] Furthermore, a legitimately large Democratic turnout had been assured by the Prohibition amendment which the paper regarded as a railroad management ploy to distract the voters from economic issues.[32] The Governorship would have given the Independents effective control of the state government, something they were never able to attain.

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[30]Theodore Saloutos has argued that railroad rates were dropping steadily in the nineteenth century and, had they dropped further, it would only have served to aggravate the midwestern farmers' problems further by shrinking the world market still more and heightening competition. Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem," 167.

[31]"The Omaha Plan," Farmers' Alliance, December 6, 1890; other items stressing the corruption of politics include: "Claiming the Independents," ibid., April 11, 1891; "A Short Retrospect," Alliance, November 16, 1889; William McKeighan, "Wealth as a Political Power," ibid., April 26, 1890; "The Railroad Power," ibid., July 12, 1890; "Dark Days, Dark Deeds," ibid., January 17, 1891; "The Issue and the Battle," Farmers' Alliance, June 11, 1891.

[32]"What is the Main Issue?," Alliance, July 12, 1890.

While the Independents controlled the legislature (on their own, 1891-1892; through fusion with the Democrats, 1893-1894), the executive and judicial branches effectively thwarted much of its action of a number of key issues. Governor Boyd vetoed the Newberry Bill in 1891, an act which the Alliance labelled the "Triumph of the Corporations."[33] Two years later, the state Supreme Court rendered an unfavorable decision in a crucial impeachment case, causing the paper to declare: "right here is the turning point in the politics of this state. Henceforth, honest government."[34] A major step in that direction had been taken with the introduction of the Australian Ballot by the 1891 legislature. The main issues in the elections that year, according to the Farmers' Alliance, were matters of government rather than economics: the veto of the Newberry Bill, Republican-Democratic collusion in the legislature, bribery of legislators and the partisanship of the state Supreme Court.[35]

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[33] "Triumph of the Corporations," Farmers' Alliance, April 11, 1891.

[34] "The Supreme Court Decision," Alliance-Independent, June 8, 1893; also, "The Great Conspiracy," ibid., December 6, 1890.

[35] Burrows, " An Appeal," Farmers' Alliance, October 15, 1891.

The movement was firmly committed to the political process and maintained its faith in democratic procedures in the face of continued frustration.[36] Fraud, vetoes and unsympathetic court decisions evoked radical rhetoric, but a reasonable program of reform. Following the veto of the Newberry Bill, the Farmers' Alliance declared:

> To settle down into apathy, to submit without battle to the existing state of affairs, is moral suicide. Thought, reason, theory, are to be supplemented by action. Force is to be met with force.[37]

By "force," however, it never meant anything beyond conventional electoral politics. Its response was to redouble its efforts to gain political support from non-farming elements of society. The American Protective Association (APA), for example, was repeatedly and vehemently condemned as a G.O.P.-railroad power device to divide the electorate on ethnic issues:

> We find on inquiry that the leading men who are promoting this organization are railroad and bank men. . . . We find that the prime object of this organization seems to be to divide and estrange the workingmen on a religious question and so prevent their acting together harmoniously on political questions.[38]

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[36]Saloutos, "Professors," 225.

[37]"Triumph of the Corporations," Farmers' Alliance, April 11, 1891.

[38]"The APA," ibid., October 1, 1891; see also, editorials, Alliance-Independent, May 11, May 18, 1893. Walter Nugents' Tolerant Populists effectively makes the case for the Populists as non-nativistic, pragmatic politicians. His book has value far beyond its ostensibly limited scope of examining the issue of nativism and is an excellent study of Kansas Populism in general.

This is not to say that the Nebraska Independents were by nature tolerant of immigrants, but only that they sought political support and opposed measures which they saw standing in their way. Similarly, they sought the vote of urban laborers and opposed attempts by railroad management to control their employees' voting behavior. The Union Pacific Railroad attempts to create company unions and to discourage their employees from voting for the Independents were severely condemned. Political reform, or "honest government," was clearly the third most important item on the paper's agenda.[39] The issue of land, the third item in the Omaha Platform, received only cursory treatment.[40]

Rather than the issues per se, this essay is concerned with the Populists' image of the world in which they lived. To ascertain that, one must penetrate the rhetoric of specific issues, which frequently obscures more than it reveals. One means of uncovering the Populist understanding of industrialism is to analyze their response to urban labor, organized and unorganized.

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[39] "The Railroad Employees and the Farmers," Farmers' Alliance, September 3, 1891; "Railroad Employees," Alliance-Independent, October 13, 1892. "As Populism followed the ways of practical party politics in the program that it offered and in the issues it chose to stress, it took a practical approach to its sources of support as well." Nugent, Tolerant Populists, p. 232.

[40] "Starved for Land," Alliance, June 26, 1889.

In its attempt to gain the votes of urban labor, the Alliance condemned company unions, but, significantly, on political and not economic grounds. Trade unions as means of economic betterment were not a subject of great concern in the paper. References were made to various unions and strikes in the news section, but these were clearly only peripheral items. The Knights of Labor played a visible role in the Populist movement and there were occasional items about the Knights in the Alliance. Yet, the Knights were a moribund organization by 1890, consisting of only 100,000 members.[41] No similar ties were forged with the American Federation of Labor, (AFL) the emerging force in the labor movement. Samuel Gompers, President of the AFL, opposed the Peoples Party in the 1892 campaign.[42]

The Alliance made occasional efforts to cultivate the votes of urban labor. Particularly notable was the 1890 Labor Day celebration in Lincoln which, judging from the

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[41] According to labor historian Gerald N. Grob, the Knights by 1890 were reduced to a group of individual reformers. Populist affinity for the Knights, was due to the fact that they were nourished by the same tradition of reform from previous decades. Gerald N. Grob, Workers and Utopia (N.P.: Northwestern University Press, 1961), pp. 90-98.

[42] Samuel Gompers, "Organized Labor in the Campaign," North American Review, CLV (July, 1892), pp. 91-96. According to labor historian Philip Foner, the AFL became much more interested in the Populist Party after the 1892 elections. Philip Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States, II (New York: International Publishers, 1955), p. 306.

extent of the coverage, was clearly a high priority item.[43] No similar effort, however, was made in any subsequent year and one can speculate that the fruits of that first effort were judged to be meagre. In 1891 the paper carried an item pointing out the Independent-sponsored legislation that would benefit labor. It emphasized the Australian Ballot, an eight-hour day bill and the defeat of a business-sponsored bill to facilitate the garnishment of wages.[44] A sober assessment of this and other Populist gestures in the direction of labor would seem to confirm Theodore Saloutos' judgement that such efforts were motivated by "convenience and opportunism."[45] Their belief in a natural harmony of interests between farmers and laborers expressed their inability to comprehend the peculiar circumstances of labor in an industrial society.

A problem in analysis is created by Populist rhetoric which used the terms "industrial" and "labor" in an archaic sense. Both were interchangeable with "producers" and referred to anyone who worked, whether on the farm or in a

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[43] Alliance, September 6, 1890; see also preceeding weeks for considerable news on the preparations.

[44] "What the Independents Have Done for Organized Labor," Farmers' Alliance, March 21, 1891.

[45] Saloutos, "Professors," 246.

factory. Thus, the superficial reader could easily misinterpret a manifesto such as:

> The Peoples Party has sprung into existence not to make the black man free, but to emancipate all men; not to secure political freedom to a class, but to gain for all industrial freedom without which there can be no political freedom.[46]

"Industrial freedom" in this context refers not to the emancipation of factory employees from the wage system, as in socialist thought, but the achievement of economic opportunity. The current situation was rhetorically compared to southern slavery, yet the prescribed remedy was the greater availability of capital: "The individual can no longer produce independently: large capital is needed and the small capitalists are being squeezed out and pressed into the dependent, work-seeking ranks. . . ."[47] Rhetoric of class conflict masked a program of petty capitalism. The Alliance's position on socialism was explicit:

> We have no sympathy with socialistic levellers, and we are no believers in equality of intellect or equality of powers. But the government which by special grants or special laws destroys equality of privilege and opportunity is on the certain road to decay.[48]

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[46] "The Citadel Attacked," Farmers' Alliance, October 22, 1891.

[47] "Liberty's Basis and Slavery's Defenses," Alliance-Independent, April 7, 1892.

[48] "The Limitation of Wealth," Alliance, June 26, 1889.

The underlying ideology was one of individualism, competition and capitalism. Its political program was radical enough in the context of the late nineteenth century, but it called only for the strengthening of the competitive system.[49] Exceptions to this generalization do exist in the pages of the Alliance -- such as occasional attacks on individualism and one provocative suggestion that political representation be apportioned on the basis of economic group rather than geography[50] -- but a balanced reading of the paper through the entire period clearly reveals such items as exceptions to the rule.

While the paper perceived the emergence of two antagonistic social classes, it did not see any fundamental change in the relationship of working people to the means of production.[51] Nor did it formulate a coherent and consistent attack upon corporations per se. Its ideology remained a simplistic one of producers versus parasites:

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[49] Norman Pollack is seriously in error on this point: "Thus, Populism did not subscribe to the ideologies of individualism, competition, and progress." Pollack, Populist Response, p. 23.

[50] "Individualism Gone Wild," Farmers' Alliance, February 28, 1891; "Industrial Representation," Alliance, August 23, 1890; also, editorial, Farmers' Alliance, October 22, 1891; "White Slaves," Alliance-Independent, June 15, 1893.

[51] "An Unlearned Lesson," Alliance, November 16, 1889; also, "Corporate Powers Again Triumphant," ibid., October 19, 1889.

> . . . we have two great interests whose welfare is apparently diametrically opposed . . . the producers of all kinds on the one hand and the men who live by incomes derived from interest on the other.[52]

Rhetorically, the plutocrats were read out of the American consensus; they were a nonproducing "class of artificial beings."[53] The frequent use of the imagery of slaveowning to describe them is an indication of the extent to which the wealthy were considered beyond the pale. Producers were small independent entrepreneurs who needed only equal opportunity to compete and prosper; the Populist program called for public control as a means of restoring competition.

While relatively few scholars have attributed a socialist ideology to the Populists, the majority have taken for granted their agrarianism. A reading of the Alliance suggests serious qualifications to the various interpretations of this agrarian ideology that have been offered. Conspicuous by their absence are expression of both sentimental idealization of the Agrarian way of life and of antagonism to the city.[54] Even the election of 1890, which

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[52] Burrows, "Does Contraction of the Currency Lower Prices?," J., ibid., October 19, 1889.

[53] "Corporate Powers Again Triumphant," ibid., October 19, 1889.

[54] A notable exception to this appeared in reaction to the Spanish-American War and will be discussed in Chapter IV.

the paper regarded as having been stolen from the Independents by fraud in Omaha, did not evoke an attack upon the city as a natural haven of corruption. Rather, the attack was directed very specifically toward the railroads and the money power. Attacks on the major Omaha newspapers, the Democratic World-Herald and the Republican Bee, were frequent but always made on the basis of political and economic issues.

It is doubtful that anything approaching a "yeoman myth" was an operative factor in the editorial mind of the Alliance. As Walter T. K. Nugent has suggested, the distinction between yeomanry and commercialism is one which exists in logic only.[55] The qualities of the farmer which the Alliance chose to celebrate were those of entrepreneurship and political progressivism. In the form of the Peoples Party, the farmers were seen as introducing new and relevant issues into the national political dialogue:

> The farmers are the only class that can make an independent stand with any show of success. They have the numbers, and they have a good degree of independence . . . while the laboring men of the cities can never lead a political revolution in this country, they are sure to assist the farmers in producing such a revolution whenever the opportunity arises.[56]

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[55] Nugent, "Parameters," 269-270.

[56] "The D_____d Farmers," Alliance-Independent, September 28, 1892; see also, editorial, Farmers' Alliance, November 15, 1891.

"Political revolution" in this context, however, meant nothing more than substituting representatives of the people for those of the plutocrats. By serving the interests of the farmers they would, necessarily, serve the interests of the country as a whole. The promise of American life lay in the future, not in a particularized agrarian past. The idea of the farmers as a vanguard in relation to the rest of the country was integrated into a view of America as a whole playing the same role in the world at large.[57]

While it celebrated the farmers as a progressive political force, the Alliance did not admit any suggestion that, economically, agriculture had fundamentally changed. The key issue again was overproduction. The paper's sensitivity on this subject was justified, for to concede overproduction would be to admit that there were structural imbalances in the economy unrelated to the depredations of special interest groups. It would have rendered irrelevant much of their political program and challenged their ideology of entrepreneurialism. The movement maintained an unshakeable emphasis on national political reform as a means of economic relief. Two economic measures were discussed briefly in the Alliance. Farm cooperatives were advocated

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[57] "America Must Lead," Alliance-Independent, July 6, 1893.

and the editorial was reprinted on the basis of a favorable response; yet, this was not a major point of emphasis.[58] The sub-treasury plan, proposed in the Omaha Platform, was rejected as impractical.[59]

It would be erroneous to assume that the Alliance formulated its program out of midwestern whole cloth. As Chester MacArthur Destler suggests, the Populist program was a synthesis of reform ideas that had been circulating across the country for many decades.[60] The pages of the Alliance reflect this involvement in national intellectual currents. Particularly notable was its response to two of the more popular reformers of the day, Edward Bellamy and Henry George. The former was received quite favorably and there were frequent items about him, his ideas and the Nationalist Clubs.[61] Henry George and his single-tax scheme, however, was rather severely criticized.[62] Destler's analysis of this response is that the Populists viewed the

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[58] Alliance, March 1, 1890; reprinted, ibid., May 10, January 17, 1891.

[59] Ibid., January 4, July 19, 1890.

[60] Destler, American Radicalism, pp. 1-31.

[61] Alliance, November 23, December 28, 1889; editorials, ibid., June 14, August 16, 1890.

[62] Ibid., November 2, November 16, 1889, January 11, 1890.

single-tax as a return to the extreme competitiveness of an older era. Bellamy's collectivism, insofar as it involved the nationalization of trusts, was more congenial to their notion of reform.[63]

Politically, the Alliance remained consistently optimistic about the Populists' prospects. It accepted the two-party framework and foresaw a political realignment with the Populists replacing the Democrats as the other major party.[64] The severe defeats suffered by the Democrats in the 1894 elections, nationally and in Nebraska, only served to confirm this idea.

In Nebraska, the Independents never succeeded in gaining full control of the state government and their best showing was probably the initial effort in 1890. Thereafter, their successes depended on cooperation or fusion with the Democrats. The Alliance found various reasons to account for this failure to achieve a political breakthrough. The 1890 Gubernatorial election had been "stolen;" in 1891 their Supreme Court candidate was defeated because they failed to mobilize the vote. Adequate rainfall in 1891 had taken some

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[63] Destler, American Radicalism, pp. 12-16, 21-22.

[64] "Only Two Parties," Alliance, September 20, 1890; "Come With Us," Alliance-Independent, April 28, 1892; "The Coming Party," ibid., March 16, 1893.

of the edge off the farm revolt and the crusade atmosphere of 1890 was lost.[65] Looking toward the national elections in 1892, the Alliance-Independent called for a "full vote and a fair count."[66]

Defeat in that election was a severe blow and the paper confessed that "during the past two years the Populists of Kansas and Nebraska have found it practically impossible to increase their numbers by gaining converts from the two old political parties. In fact, they have really lost more than they have gained." Despite this apparently gloomy situation, the paper optimistically predicted that "a change is coming."[67] In 1893 the pages of the Alliance-Independent reflected a significant drift toward free and unlimited coinage of silver as the primary issue. As John Hicks points out, the Populists found that of all the planks in the Omaha Platform, silver had proved the most widely popular in the national elections.[68]

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[65] "The Election in Nebraska," Farmers' Alliance, November 5, 1891; "The Late Election and its Lesson," ibid., November 12, 1891; see also, Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 220.

[66] "A Full Vote and a Fair Count," Alliance-Independent, October 13, 1892.

[67] "A Change is Coming," ibid., April 6, 1893.

[68] Hicks, Populist Revolt, pp. 301-320.

"If the sentiment of the people of the United States could be wholly ascertained," the paper declared in July, 1893, "there is little doubt that there would be an overwhelming majority for free silver."[69] News of the congressional struggle over repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act dominated the front page news through the spring and summer. A rally celebrating the third anniversary of the Nebraska Independent Party was billed as "a rally for free silver."[70] Finally, a major address by William Jennings Bryan on silver received prominent and sympathetic coverage; significantly, it was the first favorable treatment given to Bryan.[71]

The ultimate triumph of the silver issue within Populism should not obscure the staunch opposition that was mounted to both Bryan as the silver spokesman and fusion and the proper political tactic in the years prior to 1896. Throughout this period, the Alliance took a posture of militant opposition to both. The phenomenon of Bryan, however, as a popular native-son and an emerging national spokesman

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[69] "The People are for Silver," Alliance-Independent, July 6, 1893.

[70] "The 29th of July," ibid., July 13, 1893.

[71] "Bryan's Silver Speech," ibid., August 24, 1893.

for silver, put the Nebraska Populists in a dilemma. The Alliance developed an intense love-hate relationship toward Bryan in the early years.

It first took notice of him after his election to Congress in 1890, dismissing him as merely a "sharp young lawyer," who "cannot represent the farmers of this district."[72] Two years later as he sought reelection, it criticized him for having "greatly disappointed the people of the district who want real reform."[73] Implicit in its choice of the word "disappointed" was the recognition that Bryan was indeed a reformer, and a popular one at that. The Alliance objected to Bryan partly because he was a late-comer to financial reform (and only advocated silver, never any of the other Populist monetary reforms) and that he was a loyal Democrat. Bryan himself complicated the issue by actively courting the Populists: "I was born a Democrat, but have strong Alliance tendencies."[74]

The Omaha World-Herald had proposed fusion between the Democrats and the Independents in 1890 and the Alliance

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[72] "The Election of Mr. Bryan," Alliance, November 15, 1890.

[73] "In the First District," Alliance-Independent, August 4, 1892.

[74] Cited in Paolo E. Coletta, William Jennings Bryan, I, Political Evangelist, 1860-1908 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 73. According to Coletta, Bryan did not come out publicly for silver until mid-1891.

had rejected it outright.[75] In their view, the Democrats were doomed to extinction and fusion was a cynical and desperate maneuver to perpetuate the party with the aid of Independent votes. In the years to come, however, the Populist Party would also develop an interest in perpetuating itself and then, reluctantly, come to accept fusion.

By late 1893 the pages of the Alliance reflected the growing Populist dilemma. A political impasse was leading to acceptance of the silver issue as a vehicle for a possible breakthrough. At the same time, the ramifications of this development--fusion--ran counter to the proud independence of the movement. Political exigencies were leading it to scrap much of its well-developed program in favor of the single-issue. Ideologically, the paper was comfortably within the consensus of the times: Individualist and capitalist in economics; pragmatic in politics.

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[75] Alliance, May 3, 1890; "John R. Morrisy and the World Herald's Fusion Proposition, ibid., May 10, 1890; "They Are Friends and Allies," ibid., November 15, 1890; see also, "About Fusion," Alliance-Independent, June 9, 1892.

CHAPTER III

THE MIDDLE YEARS

A CHRISTIAN SOCIALIST INTERLUDE

In October, 1893 George Howard Gibson became editor of the Alliance-Independent and, for the next two years, proceeded to radically alter its political and intellectual point of view. Gibson was no stranger to the paper, having served it in various capacities over the years. He began as local editor and ad solicitor in 1891, had been a temporary editor-in-chief for a few months in 1892 and for six months in 1893 had been a correspondent in Chicago. His poems, songs and book reviews had been occasional features of the paper.[1]

Before coming to Lincoln, Gibson had owned and edited a temperance publication in Omaha. That venture failed when Prohibition was defeated in the 1890 elections.[2] His roots were urban rather than agrarian and his point of view that

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[1]Gibson's previous contributions were summarized by the owners in the "Announcement," Alliance-Independent, October 5, 1893.

[2]James W. Savage and John T. Bell, History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska and South Omaha (New York & Chicago: Munsell and Co., 1894), p. 172.

of the moral reformer. Making no secret of his beliefs, he introduced himself to his readers with the following credo:

> I believe, religiously, morally and very difinitely in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. . . . God's priceless abundant gifts must not be cornered for purposes of oppression and robbery. Society owes as much help to one individual as to another. Monopolists are in a word all these, kings, despots, robbers, slaveowners and they must with such be classed. In the degree that I love liberty I hate monopoly.[3]

Gibson was a devout Christian Socialist and he viewed the crisis of the 1890's in both moral and economic terms.[4] His "Salutatory" set forth the essentials of his faith: the earth and its products were gifts from God which men were to use in the spirit of equalitarian brotherhood. Monopolies were an evil which had violated this injunction. Gibson saw his editorial role as that of spreading the true gospel which he claimed to have read "in a new light, with clarified vision." He particularly sought to gain the ear of ministers (who were offered subscriptions at half price) and other editors so that they, in their turn, would propagate the faith.[5]

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[3] "Salutatory," Alliance-Independent, October 5, 1893.

[4] For the background of Christian Socialism, see Dombrowski, The Early Days of Christian Socialism; Quint, The Forging of American Socialism: pp. 103-141.

[5] Editorial, Alliance-Independent, November 9, November 23, 1893.

Upon becoming editor, Gibson made significant changes in the paper's formal structure. First, he and his staff acquired full ownership and operated it as a cooperative venture.[6] The translation of his ideas on Christian cooperation into reality was to be a continuing struggle for George Gibson. He founded a cooperative business venture in Lincoln in 1894 and, later, sold the paper to help found a utopian community in Georgia.[7] The second change was renaming the paper. The unwieldy Alliance-Independent gave way to Wealth Makers, which Gibson felt more adequately expressed the Populist credo that wealth belongs to him who creates it.[8]

The new name was also dictated by Gibson's plan to alter the political orientation of the paper. While keeping it the official organ of the Farmers' Alliance and the Independent Party, he expressed a desire to make it "more than that." Specifically, he sought to "reach the people of the cities, as well as the farming class," and the name Wealth Makers expressed to his satisfaction, the solidarity

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[6]"To Our Friends and Patrons," Wealth Makers, February 15, 1894.

[7]Dombrowski, Early Days of Christian Socialism, p. 132; Quint, Forging of American Socialism, p. 131.

[8]Wealth Makers, February 15, 1894.

of interests between the urban and rural producing classes.[9] In this regard, Gibson was attempting to consummate that which had always been on the Populist agenda. Yet, by virtue of his Christian Socialist belief in cooperation rather than competition, he was deviating radically from the mainstream of the movement.

Politically, Gibson pledged his support for the full Omaha Platform and published that document in toto in virtually every issue during his tenure.[10] The 1892 Platform, however, could be adapted to serve different points of view and Gibson found it the basis for his personal social and political outlook. The official organ of the Nebraska Populist movement under his editorial direction was transformed into a platform for Christian Socialism. In many respects it still conformed to mainstream Populism, but in others it deviated seriously. In terms of intellectual depth and philosophic consistency it far excelled the paper of his predecessors.[11]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] "Why I Am a Populist," Alliance-Independent, November 30, 1893.

[11] Clifford Bowman in his stuay of the Nebraska press completely misses Gibson's uniqueness: "He expressed opinions and policies close to those of his predecessors." Bowman, "The Local Nebraska Press," p. 40.

The crisis of the 1890's, according to Gibson, was the result of rampant individualism which was ipso-facto a violation of the cooperative ethic. The specific economic abuses of the time were manifestations of this, as "trusts, monopolies and corporation combines are a legitimate offspring and part of selfish, struggling individualism."[12] While it had played an important historic role in advancing human freedom, new economic circumstances meant that unrestricted individualism entailed the loss of liberty for the great mass of humanity.[13] Society was now complex and individuals were necessarily interdependent: "The self-interest, the good of the individual is bound up with society's interests."[14] Individualism was not only morally wrong, but it was also an irrelevant ideology in a world in which solitary men were increasingly unable to provide for their basic needs, through no fault of their own.[15] Gibson perceived that industrialism had fundamentally changed the nature of society and that a new value system was needed.

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[12]"The Sham Anti-Trust Law," Alliance-Independent, December 28, 1893.

[13]"Political Freedom and Weakness of Society," Wealth Makers, June 27, 1895.

[14]"Consider Carefully These Truths," Alliance-Independent, November 16, 1893.

[15]"The Needs of the Hour," ibid., October 12, 1893.

Reform was a two-fold matter of restraining individualism and assisting the common man. His program was both moral and political. He called for substituting a cooperative ethic for that of competition. The choice was stark and unambiguous: "We wish to place the real conditions before the young. Two methods of living are before you to choose from, viz: single-handed competition and many-sided cooperation."[16] Society should be reorganized along the lines of cooperation and equality. Mere political equality was inadequate in the modern world for it meant nothing to the economically dispossessed: the Negro in the South, the unemployed tramp and the exploited wage-earner.[17] Society should be organized around the principle of the "common interest" which would unite men in "an industrial democracy which is organized Christianity."[18]

The political expression of this moral impulse was nationalization of industries. Gibson waged an unrelenting war upon monopolies in his editorial columns. Nationalization would solve the economic problem, he argued, because

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[16]"Self or Society, Which?," Wealth Makers, November 29, 1894.

[17]"Political Freedom and Weakness of Society," ibid., June 27, 1895.

[18]"The Lessons of Society," ibid., November 7, 1895.

former profits could be paid out in increased wages.[19] This, in turn, would create demand for farm products and restore prosperity to agriculture. While not openly admitting the issue of overproduction, Gibson did recognize that the farm sector was dependent upon the market of the cities.[20] Nationalization would also deal with the moral problem as a step in the direction of cooperative ownership.

Gibson stressed the anti-monopolist aspect of Populism and emphatically denigrated the value of free silver. His New Year's editorial in 1894 declared that:

> It should not be lost sight of for a moment that the money question is the usury question. The silver question is but a small part of it at best, and but for ignorance and custom it would be no part at all.[21]

This appeared at the end of a year in which the Alliance-Independent, under its previous editor, and the Populist movement nationally, had taken a significant turn in the direction of silver. Gibson's deviation from mainstream Populism was not a late-blooming development.

He integrated the money question into his anti-monopolist stance and saw it as the "usury" question. Usury was

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[20] "Solidarity of Interests," Alliance-Independent, October 5, 1893; also, "The Utopia We Are After," Wealth Makers, February 15, 1894.

[21] "The Future of the Populist Movement," Alliance-Independent, January 4, 1894; see also, editorial, ibid., November 30, 1893, February 1, 1894; editorial, Wealth Makers, March 14, 1895.

an all-inclusive term for interest, rent and profits. Nationalization of the banks would eliminate interest and nationalization of industry would eliminate profits. Gibson's understanding of usury expressed the Populist moral judgement of the plutocrats as an artificial nonproducing class. In the pages of the Wealth Makers, he never explicitly advocated the common ownership of all property, but the idea was certainly implicit in the thrust of his ideas. Undoubtedly he felt somewhat constrained by virtue of editing the official organ of the Nebraska Populist movement; upon leaving the paper in 1896 he founded a utopian community based on the principle of common ownership.

Gibson's moral critique of modern society included many of the inherent characteristics of industrialism. The nature of work had been transformed by the introduction of the factory system:

> Fifty years ago the American shoemaker owned the whole machinery of his craft and his own workshop. He was complete master of himself, independent and respected. Now he is entirely dependent on machinery owned by capitalists.[22]

He condemned the wage system as being "worse than chattel slavery," for it lacked even the ameliorating

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[22] "Of Interest to Individualists," Wealth Makers, July 11, 1895; also, "Are Common Men Benefitted?," ibid., December 5, 1895.

paternalism of the old plantation system.[23] Industrial capitalism was "a large grinding machine" that dehumanized men.[24]

Agriculture, meanwhile, had not been transformed, but had simply fallen behind urban America in many respects. The urban-oriented Gibson evisioned using modern technology to alleviate some of the problems of farm life. Farms which were "at present . . . isolated, laborious and, in the matter of labor and capital, uneconomical," could be joined into small communities by means of mechanical transportation to permit the sharing of common facilities.[25] Such a vision of the future belied the apocalyptic rhetoric he frequently employed ("the prospect for the average man is growing darker and darker.")[26] America held great potential and only the monopolists stood in the way of its realization. He rejected Frederick Jackson Turner's suggestion that the frontier was permanently closed, arguing that the railroads had seized all the best land. Destroy

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[23] "Worse Than Chattel Slavery," ibid., August 1, 1895.

[24] "Crime and Criminals Compared," ibid., January 31, 1895.

[25] "Farming in the Future," ibid., April 5, 1894.

[26] "Society of Self, Which?," ibid., November 29, 1894.

this monopoly power and the western safety-valve would be restored.[27]

A significant aspect of George Gibson's Wealth Makers was the group of regular contributors he solicited for its pages. Previous editors had published articles by local and national figures, but Gibson transformed this feature into a sounding board for his own philosophy. His own views, expressed regularly and eloquently in the editorial columns were buttressed by the articles of a number of men with similar ideas. The regular appearance of these articles added to the singular moral and intellectual flavor of the paper.

The most notable of this group was the Reverend George D. Herron, a nationally known Christian Socialist, then teaching in Iowa.[28] On the basis of the similarities between their ideas, it is evident that Herron served as Gibson's moral and intellectual mentor. The utopian community that Gibson helped found in 1896 had Herron's unofficial sponsorship. Gibson introduced him to his readers

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[27] "The Final Conflict Begun," ibid., September 27, 1894. Gibson did not refer to Turner by name, but he did speak of the safety-valve and had been in Chicago as a correspondent when Turner delivered his paper.

[28] George D. Herron and the Christian Socialist movement, of which he was one of the more radical spokesmen, are discussed in Dombrowski, Early Days of Christian Socialism, pp. 132-170; and, Quint, Forging of American Socialism, pp. 126-141.

as a "man with a mission," and featured his writings and sermons regularly thereafter.[29] Something of a crescendo was reached in the June 21, 1894 edition which carried a full 12½ columns of Herron's speeches. Much of it was his commencement address at the University of Nebraska, heralded by Gibson as the "moral and political event of the past week." Herron assailed individualism and called for a new cooperative ethic: "the mission of the state is not fulfilled in the liberty of the individual, but in the association of men in a righteous unity."[30]

Another regular contributor was Professor William A. Jones of Hastings College in Fremont, Nebraska. Jones contributed a number of articles offering a secular radical critique of modern industrialism. He stressed the changed nature of industrial labor and the declining position of the agrarian sector. His prescription was a national collectivism that resembled Gibson's in many respects.[31] Finally, Gibson's views on the matter of interest were expounded in extensive

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[29] "Man With a Mission," Wealth Makers, March 29, 1894.

[30] "The Great Oration," ibid., June 21, 1894. An expanded version of this address was subsequently published as George D. Herron, The Christian State: A Political Vision of Christ (New York and Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1895).

[31] William A. Jones, "The Economic Situation," Wealth Makers, February 14, 1895.

detail in a five-part series by J. R. Bennet. This series, as were many other articles, was reprinted from the Arena, a reform journal published in Boston.[32]

Gibson's utopia lay in the future; condemning the present economic system, he sought to transcend it through individual moral reformation and a political program to enact moral principles. His focus was not the repeal of special privilege and the maintenance of competitive opportunity, but the transformation of men and society through a new ethical frame of reference. Gibson transcended the prevailing ideologies of his day and was able to do so precisely because, as a Christian Socialist, he had an alternative ideology.

Like his predecessors on the paper, he was firmly committed to the democratic process: "A man's ballot is the scepter of his individual sovereignty. By using it wisely, intelligently, he maintains his manhood and guards at all points against the insidious encroachments of tyranny."[33] Toward this end, he called for the extension of democracy by means of the initiative and referendum. Legislators were corruptible, if not already corrupt, and the true expression of the people's will could best be guaranteed through "direct

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[32]J. R. Bennet, "Old Error Unvieled," ibid., April-May, 1894.

[33]"The Value of the Ballot," Alliance-Independent, October 26, 1893.

democracy."[34] During the summer of 1894 Gibson conducted a vigorous campaign for the adoption of the initiative and referendum by the state Independent party.[35] Though adopted, they appeared to be lower in the order of priorities than he would have preferred.[36]

Gibson's tenure coincided with the deepening of the depression that had begun in April, 1893. He responded editorially to the immediate crisis and his proposals were consistent with his basic outlook. Massive unemployment only confirmed his condemnation of capitalism; it was "a necessary part of the capitalistic system."[37] As a short-term remedy he recommended a system of government public works: "it is plainly the pressing duty of the state to furnish work to the unemployed."[38] He also published and commented favorably on Kansas Governor Lorenzo Lewelling's

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[34] "The People Must Make and Unmake the Laws," ibid., January 4, 1894.

[35] Wealth Makers, July 26, August 2, August 9, 1894.

[36] "The Most Needed of All," ibid., August 30, 1894.

[37] "The Cause of Unwilling Pauperism," Alliance-Independent, December 7, 1893.

[38] "Work for the Unemployed," ibid., October 12, 1893.

famous "Tramp Circular," issued in the grim winter of 1893-1894.[39]

The year 1894 was one of considerable social turmoil as Jacob Coxey's Commonweal Army marched on Washington and Eugene V. Debs led the American Railway Union (ARU) in the Pullman Strike. Gibson was excited by Debs' formation of the ARU in early 1894 and expressed solidarity with it:

> In behalf of the people in Nebraska we reach out earnest hands of Brotherhood to those whose cooperative and educational lines of labor converge and agree with ours. The interests of the producing classes are one and indivisible.[40]

The Pullman Strike and Debs' subsequent legal struggles received extensive and sympathetic coverage. Similar treatment was given Coxey's Army and its midwestern section, Kelly's Army. Gibson referred to Coxey as a latter-day John Brown and supported his program of government public works.[41] He also condemned an anti-lawlessness proclamation issued by the Mayor of Omaha when Kelly's Army passed through town.[42]

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[39] Editorial, ibid., December 7, 1893.

[40] "The American Railway Union," ibid., January 18, 1894.

[41] Editorials, Wealth Makers, April 5, April 19, 1894.

[42] Editorial, ibid., April 26, 1894.

In the elections of 1894, while a bold attempt at a labor-Populist coalition was being made in Illinois, a similar but perfunctory effort along the same lines was attempted in Nebraska. The initiative seemed to lie with labor, rather than the Populists and the Wealth Makers expressed no particular enthusiasm for it.[43] After the elections, Gibson accused the membership of the American Federation of Labor of being an undependable voting bloc.[44] His attitude toward labor unions was ambiguous; while expressing solidarity with the ARU, he specifically admired their "cooperative and educational" work. Unions in general he criticized for accepting the principles of individualism and competition.[45]

Fusion was the most pressing political question for the Nebraska Independents in 1894 as William Jennings Bryan was beginning his efforts to transform the Democratic Party. According to his biographer, Paolo Coletta, Bryan developed and perfected the techniques he would use in 1896 in the

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[43]The Nebraska Federation of Labor endorsed the Populist Program. "All Labor Uniting," ibid., August 23, 1894. The evidence would seem to confirm Philip Foner's judgement that the AFL became much more interested in a coalition after 1892. Foner, History of the Labor Movement, p. 309. For the Illinois coalition see Destler, American Radicalism, pp. 162-254. The episode is not mentioned in Philip Taft, Organized Labor in American History (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

[44]Editorial, Wealth Makers, December 26, 1895.

[45]Ibid., January 24, 1895.

preceeding years in Nebraska.[46] As editor of the Nebraska Populists' official organ, Gibson increasingly had to deal with the urgent and difficult questions of political tactics. Following the pattern set by his predecessors, he maintained a staunch opposition to fusion and to the rising star of Bryan. He had fewer problems in this regard than previous editors, for he was never tempted by the silver issue.

Gibson accepted the two-party framework and saw the Populists replacing the Democrats as the other major party. The Populists, he believed, had barely begun to tap their potential sources of voters and fulfillment of that destiny was merely a matter of education and organization. There was no reason for the Populists to abandon their independence.[47] Fusion was regarded as a cynical and opportunistic Democratic maneuver. Editorials on Bryan were usually the occasion for an attack on both his opportunism and the inadequacy of free silver.[48]

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[46] Coletta, Bryan, pp. 90-91, 100-102.

[47] "The Populist Outlook," Alliance-Independent, November 16, 1893; "It Was Ignorance Defeated Us," ibid. National Party Chairman Herman Taubeneck was also strongly opposed to fusion at this time: Taubeneck, Wealth Makers, August 16, 1894; Taubeneck, "No Entangling Alliances," ibid., August 23, 1894.

[48] "Proposed Political Prostitution," Wealth Makers, March 1, 1894; "Let Us Reason Together," ibid., June 21, 1894; editorials, August 2, August 9, 1894; "Mr. Bryan Examined," ibid., August 22, 1895.

Bryan's efforts eventually succeeded; the Democrats scheduled their convention after the Nebraska Independents and simply renominated many of the same candidates. The result was the election of Silas A. Holcomb as the first Populist Governor. The Wealth Makers, however, remained less than satisfied with the overall results and with some good cause. Gibson complained that the fusion ticket received less than half the Democratic vote and that Bryan had given his full support to only a few of the fusion candidates.[49] While a fusionist Governor had been elected, the Republicans swept every other state office and had gained considerably in the cities. The results in Nebraska confirm those analysts who interpret 1894 as a major watershed in voting behavior.[50] Gibson correctly identified the fact that

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[49] "The Returns Roughly Analyzed," ibid., November 15, 1894.

[50] For this analysis of the 1894 elections see Carl N. Degler, "American Political Parties and the Rise of the City Vote," Journal of American History, LI (June, 1964), 41-59; Samuel P. Hays, "The Social Analysis of American Political History, 1880-1920," Political Science Quarterly, LXXX (September, 1965) 373-394. Their findings are confirmed for Nebraska in Nebraska Blue Book for 1901 and 1902 (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1901). For similar results in other strong midwestern Populist states, see Leon Fuller, "Colorado's Revolt Against Capitalism," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXI (December, 1934), 343-360 and Walter T. K. Nugent, "How the Populists Lost in 1894," Kansas Historical Quarterly, XXI (August, 1965), 245-255. These latter two articles confirm simply that the Populists suffered severe losses in 1894; they do not share the same interpretation of that fact with Degler and Hays.

the Independents had not made significant gains through fusion, but did not see the larger implications.

The weeks following the 1894 elections were a critical period for the national Populist movement. Strategy had to be formulated for the 1896 presidential election and difficult decisions had to be made on both silver and the matter of possible fusion with other silver forces. Populist Party Chairman Herman Taubeneck, who now favored the single-issue approach, called for a December National Conference in St. Louis.[51] Gibson attended the conference and reported on it at length upon his return. The silver-minded leadership had been outvoted by the majority in attendance which favored retaining the full Omaha Platform. Gibson proudly identified himself with the victorious group, the self-styled "true" Populists, now called the "middle of the roaders." Prominent among this group were Henry Demarest Lloyd, Clarence Darrow, Jacob Coxey and Eugene V. Debs. Like Gibson, they were urban-oriented reformers rather than agrarians.[52]

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[51] Taubeneck, Wealth Makers, November 29, 1894.

[52] "The National Conference," ibid., January 3, 1895. The conference is examined in detail in Destler, American Radicalism, pp. 228-231.

In taking a position against silver, Gibson claimed to represent the rank and file of the movement.[53] Yet, there is ample evidence in the Wealth Makers itself to suggest that he was increasingly isolated from the mainstream of Nebraska Populism. Senator William V. Allen, the state's most important Populist, and William Jennings Bryan were both becoming the leading advocates of free silver within their respective parties.[54] An increasing number of editorials on "socialism," in a defensive though never apologetic tone, began to appear in 1895. Senator Allen and George Gibson exchanged lengthy and critical letters on the issue. Gibson's two-part reply included the statement that,

> Mr. Allen asks us to keep socialism out of the Wealth Makers. What he means by socialism he does not say. But if he wishes us to quit advocating the sort of socialism that is found in the Omaha Platform and Christianity, we shall have to be excused.[55]

He accused the self-styled "practical politicians" who wanted to subordinate the more radical planks of the Populist Platform of being the most impractical of all, for those planks were the very heart of Populism. Deny them and the movement

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[53] "Ahead of the Times," Wealth Makers, January 17, 1895.

[54] Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 312.

[55] "Reply to Senator Allen," Wealth Makers, May 23, May 30, 1895. Gibson had previously criticized Allen for his "apostasy" in an editorial, ibid., February 14, 1895.

would lose its raison d'etre.[56] In George Gibson's mind, Populism and Christian Socialism were one and the same.

His growing isolation from mainstream Nebraska Populism is further indicated by hostile and pointed comments in other Populist newspapers. The Wahoo, Nebraska New Era published the following criticism in mid-1895:

> The Populist Papers are very much dissatisfied with the way in which the Wealth Makers of Lincoln has been abusing its privilege as an organ of the Populist Party, and seem to think that Mr. Gibson is hardly the proper person to turn the crank.[57]

Significantly, the New Era was taking a militant anti-fusionist position at the time and its objections to the Wealth Makers had to have been on other grounds. "Socialism" was the all-encompasing term for Gibson's radicalism, both his philosophical Christian Socialism and his tactical anti-silver stand. By virtue of his philosophy, Gibson was not even representative of the emerging "middle of the road" Populist faction, which opposed silver and fusion but was not socialistic. Howard H. Quint has coined the term "permeation socialists" to describe the group of midwesterners to which Gibson belonged. This group, which

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[56] "Speaking of Log Rolling," ibid., March 28, 1895; also, "Socialism the Great Danger," ibid., November 28, 1895.

[57] Editorial, New Era (Wahoo, Nebraska), June 13, 1895.

included Julius Wayland's Coming Nation, Thomas Byron's Farmer Tribune and H. W. Young's Star and Kansan, joined the Populist movement in the hope of influencing and guiding it in a more socialistic direction.[58]

Under Gibson's editorship, the Wealth Makers had also suffered a spectacular decline in circulation, from 23,248 in March 1893 to 8,123 in late 1894 and, finally, to about 4,500 in late 1895. Harrassed by the combined forces of political isolation and a deteriorating financial situation, Gibson's thoughts began to move in other directions and he sought to divest himself of the newspaper.[59]

Disillusioned with politics, he began to think seriously about a radical attempt at creating a model Christian community. Along these lines, he had founded a cooperative business venture, the Christian Corporation, in 1894.[60] By late 1895 he was ready for a more complete break and began to negotiate the formation of the Christian

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[58]Quint, Forging of American Socialism, pp. 211-212.

[59]Letter, J. Hyatt, Farmers Alliance Papers, roll #2, frames 1708-1709. This letter indicates Gibson's desire to sell and gives the 4,500 circulation figure; the other figures were published in the paper. Some of this decline might be attributed to the depression, but the New Era, whose circulation hovered in the 2,000 range, increased by a few hundred during the same period.

[60]"A Vision of Paradise," Wealth Makers, November 8, 1894.

Commonwealth Colony in Georgia. Upon selling the paper in January, 1896, he lead a group of Nebraskans to join the community.[61]

The new owners merged the paper with the Independent, another Populist Paper in Lincoln, and published it as the Nebraska Independent. Format and edition numbering were retained from the Wealth Makers. The first issue of the new paper carried George Gibson's "Valedictory," expressing the depths of his disillusionment with politics and indicating the new directions his idealism was taking him:

> I have more and more grown to dislike politics, even the politics of a reform party, for reasons that I need not mention. . . . I think I can do more thorough, deeper fundamental social work as an investigating moralist. . . . I consider our whole commercial system and civilization wrong. I have come to believe lately, that attempts to patch it up politically, by legislation can never make it right. A new foundation must be laid. A new system, a new society, on the opposite principle, must be started to save the people.[62]

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[61] Dombrowski, Early Days of Christian Socialism, p. 132.

[62] "Valedictory," Independent, January 16, 1896.

CHAPTER IV

THE FINAL YEARS

THE BRYAN CAMPAIGN AND IMPERIALISM

The first issue of the Nebraska Independent appeared on January 16, 1896. Removal of George Howard Gibson from the editorship of the party official organ constituted a virtual restoration. The new management, in an obvious reference to the departed owner-editor, declared that "this paper will be the personal organ of no man."[1] Politically, it announced a return to Populist orthodoxy, although the exact nature of that orthodoxy was in flux:

> In politics the paper will support the principles of the Peoples Party. It will advocate or favor no faction and none of the impracticable issues; but will stand squarely upon the populist platform. In national affairs it will advocate especially the free coinage of silver, and monetary reform. While doing this, however, it will not lose sight of other needed reforms.[2]

Free silver was in the ascendancy and the "other needed reforms" were being relegated to a minor role. The

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[1] "Announcement," Independent, January 16, 1896. The identity of the new editor was not revealed.

[2] Ibid.

changing sentiment in favor of free silver was reflected on the front page of the same issue of the Independent. "A Rally of Patriots" headlined a report of the meeting of the Nebraska Silver League in Lincoln at which there was reportedly a large and enthusiastic audience.[3]

The coming presidential election presented the Populist movement with a cruel dilemma. The depression had spurred sentiment for reform across the country and the well-organized silver forces had succeeded in capturing the mantle of reform.[4] Both the Republican and Democratic parties were faced with insurgent silver advocates within their ranks. The Populists faced two separate but equally difficult decisions. The first was whether to capture the silver movement by subordinating the other planks in their platform. The second was what to do if one of the major parties endorsed silver. With regard to the first, they could maintain the integrity of their platform only at the expense of political success. With regard to the second, political success

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[3] "A Rally of Patriots," ibid.

[4] The American Bimetallic League actually antedated the Populist movement, having been founded in 1889. It did not begin to organize in earnest, however, until 1893. The strength of its organization is documented in James A. Barnes, "Myths of the Bryan Campaign," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XXXIV (December, 1947), 370-376.

through fusion might be purchased only at the expense of the existence and identity of the Populist Party itself.[5]

The Populist dilemma was reflected in the ambiguous editorial posture of the Independent in the early months of 1896. On the one hand, it declared that there was "no truth" to reports that the reform forces (meaning the Populists) planned to enter the presidential campaign on the basis of a single issue (meaning silver).[6] Party Chairman Herman Taubeneck opposed the single issue tactic and the Independent agreed, labelling it "surrender."[7]

Nevertheless, the drift toward silver, which had begun in 1893, grew apace. In retrospect, it is clear that the paper under Gibson had taken a deviant course. The Independent expressed confidence that the silver forces would bolt the regular parties and join the Populists. It celebrated the American Bimetallic League convention by noting that "They Shout The Pop War Cry" and were "Marching

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[5]This essay has relied heavily on Robert C. Durden, The Climax of Populism for its interpretation of the Populist dilemma in 1896. Durden is particularly sensitive to the unpleasant alternatives faced by the party and rejects the idea that the actions eventually taken represented either a "sell-out" or an opportunistic stroke.

[6]"Kill The Thing," Independent, January 30, 1896.

[7]"Fake Interviews," ibid., March 12, 1896; "Taubeneck Speaks," ibid., May 28, 1896.

to Join Our Forces."[8] General Adoniram J. Warner, President of the League, contributed an article expounding the Populist doctrine that the gold standard and not overproduction, was the cause of low farm prices.[9] The Independent featured it prominently on the front page. Reflecting the boom for silver, the editorial page of the February 6th issue carried eleven editorials, nine dealing with the gold-silver question.[10]

For the national Populist movement, the major tactical question was the timing of the Nominating Convention. Coverage of this internal struggle in the Independent is wholly inadequate.[11] The pro-silver fusionist forces prevailed in the end and the convention was scheduled to follow those of the two major parties. This decision reflected the optimistic assumption that both parties would declare for the gold standard and that the bolting silver people would flock to the Populists.

The great threat to this strategy was the possibility that one of the major parties would nominate a pro-silver

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[8]"Goodbye Old Parties," ibid., January 30, 1896; "Our Homeless Silver Friends.," ibid., March 5, 1896.

[9]A. J. Warner, "A Talk With Farmers," ibid., February 13, 1896.

[10]Ibid., February 6, 1896.

[11]Durden, The Climax of Populism is the most recent and thorough study of the internal Populist struggle.

candidate, and the Independent reacted irrationally as it perceived a movement in that direction. It identified the possible nomination of a silver candidate by the Democrats as a "Rothschild Plot" to split the reform vote.[12] In a more rational response, it repeatedly warned the Democrats in unmistakeable language that the Populists would not support any free silver candidate they might nominate:

> The Independent gives notice that no free silver candidate nominated at Chicago will get any support from the Populist Party, no matter who he is.[13]

The Independent did not identify William Jennings Bryan as a possible candidate for the Democratic nomination, yet it was conscious of his role as a leading advocate of silver within the party. Bryan's stature as a popular native-son created additional difficulties. Rather than attack him directly, it chose to pay homage to his honesty and ability, while offering the friendly advice that he should not count on the Nebraska Populists voting for a

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[12] "The Plot Unfolds," Independent, April 2, 1896; Much has been made of alleged Populist anti-semitism; the evidence of the Independent seems to indicate that the paper was primarily anti-money power and terms such as "Shylock" and "Rothschild" were rhetorical labels for it. More important, the Independent was far more virulent in its attacks on England as the seat of the money power and that such attacks increased in direct proportion to the rise of the silver issue. See Nugent, Tolerant Populists, p. 109.

[13] "Unrelenting War," Independent, April 9, 1896.

Democratic nominee.[14] On the eve of the Democratic convention, the Independent stood firmly against fusion.[15]

This posture, however, was undermined by the paper's enthusiasm for silver. A portent of things to come was the paper's boomlet for Senator Henry Teller, a silver advocate who had just bolted the Republican convention.[16] When the Democrats proceeded to nominate Bryan on a silver platform, the Independent found it impossible to resist fusion.

The front page of the July 16 Independent, immediately following the Democratic convention, graphically illustrated the Populist dilemma. The full text of "Bryan's Great Speech," occupied the left-hand columns; reflecting the paper's enthusiasm for both Bryan and silver. The right-hand columns, however, were devoted to letters to the editor debating the appropriate Populist strategy in response to Bryan's nomination. The headline, "What Shall We Do?," expressed the uncertainty and confusion of the moment.[17]

A majority of the letters proposed Bryan as the Populist nominee and the editorial page carried a note, just

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[14] "Notice to Mr. Bryan," ibid., April 30, 1896; see also, "The Democracy's Candidate," ibid., May 7, 1896.

[15] "Our Policy," ibid., July 2, 1896; Party Chairman Herman Taubeneck maintained a similar position at that time; "Taubeneck Declares," ibid.

[16] Ibid., June, 1896. Durden, Climax, p. 23.

[17] Independent, July 23, 1896.

under the masthead, reading in bold-face type: "Nebraska's Choice for President 1896-1900 is Wm. J. Bryan."[18] The principle editorial, however, dodged the issue of the Populist nominee. Answering its own question, "What Ought We To Do," the paper recommended a ten-point guideline that dealt only with the well-known monetary issues.[19]

The Populist convention, which ultimately nominated Bryan and Tom Watson, received wholly inadequate coverage un the Independent.[20] One gains only a meagre account of the overt actions taken and nothing of the bitter factionalism. Only one subsequent item hinted at the seriousness of the party split; a brief editorial offered condolences to the Southern Populists, acknowledging that they had lost in the convention struggle. It expressed the hope that they would "find a way out of their present difficulties."[21]

The Independent fully supported the nomination of Bryan and the fusion policy. Explaining its position, the

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[18] Ibid.

[19] "What Ought We To Do?," ibid.

[20] The best account of the Populist convention is in Durden, Climax of Populism, pp. 23-44.

[21] "Our Southern Friends," Independent, July 30, 1896.

paper argued that it had united with the other two parties in order to elect a candidate which would be an important first step in wresting control of the government from the money power.[22] Reading between the lines, one gets the impression that they expected more than just the free and unlimited coinage of silver from the election of Bryan.[23] The paper followed the Populist National Committee in pointing out that the alternative to fusion was an unacceptable "narrow partisanship."[24] It covered Bryan's travels extensively and offered periodic reports on his prospects for November.[25]

Most of the editorial content of the paper was given to the battle of the gold and silver standards. It

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[22]Where We Are At," ibid., August 6, 1896.

[23]"Silver was but a symbol of things deep and fundamental . . . ." Barnes, "Myths," 369.

[24]Editorial, Independent, October 22, 1896.

[25]The campaign of 1896 has been extensively examined in the following: Stanley L. Jones, The Presidential Election of 1896 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Paul W. Glad, McKinley, Bryan and the People (Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1964); Durden, Climax of Populism; James A. Barnes, "Myths;" William Diamond, "Urban and Rural Voting in 1896," American Historical Review, XLVI (January, 1941), 281-305; Gilbert C. Fite, "Republican Strategy and the Farm Vote in the Presidential Campaign of 1896," American Historical Review, LXV (July, 1960), 787-806.

would appear that the Republicans successfully put the silver forces on the defensive. The Independent devoted considerable space to refuting the idea that free silver would result in a "53¢ dollar." Apparently, the Republicans succeeded in adopting Populist imagery and using it to their own advantage. They argued that a cheaper dollar would hurt the "producers" and that free and unlimited coinage of silver would only benefit a handful of plutocrats, the silver mine operators.[26] The Populists were also trapped by their own argument that inflation would raise prices. The Independent attempted to prove, through wholly specious arguments, that inflation would raise wholesale but not retail prices. The Republicans had argued that higher prices would hurt workers and pensioners in particular.[27]

Secondary issues in the campaign were the reelection of Governor Holcomb and the confusing Vice-Presidential situation. The Populists had nominated Tom Watson because among other reasons, Arthur Sewell was wholly unacceptable. The Independent supported the rejection of Sewell, noting that he could not be a reformer since he obviously did not look like he was suffering.[28] It was somewhat late, however,

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[26]Editorials, Independent, September 17, September 24, October 1, 1896.

[27]"Poor Fool Goldite Editors," ibid., September 3, 1896.

[28]Editorial, ibid., September 10, 1896.

in embracing Tom Watson, the Populist nominee, reflecting the sectional tensions within the Populist Party. Not until Watson toured the midwest and visited Lincoln did he receive any extensive coverage.[29]

In the face of Bryan's defeat, the Independent maintained a stiff upper lip. One consolation was the re-election of Governor Holcomb, causing the paper to predict that "a new era will dawn on this state."[30] Reflecting on the decision to fuse with the Democrats on the silver issue, the paper had no regrets, arguing that it had given reform arguments a wider audience than ever before. The Populists were greatly strengthened, it felt.[31] The lesson of the campaign was that victory at the polls depended on educational work of the sort that could not be done in the heat of a partisan campaign. Now was the time to begin the campaign of 1900.[32] It managed to rationalize Bryan's defeat as a stroke of good fortune, for if he had won he would have been saddled with both an

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[29]"Our Southern Guest," ibid., September 24, 1896.

[30]"Nebraska Redeemed," ibid., November 5, 1896.

[31]"Onward We March," ibid., November 26, 1896. Other expressions of optimism about the campaign and the future include: "Populism in the Late Campaign," ibid., January 7, 1897; "What of the Future," ibid., January 28, 1897.

[32]"Lessons From This Campaign," ibid., November 5, 1897.

uncooperative congress and blame for the new economic recession.[33]

Just as the Omaha Platform became a Populist article of faith after the 1892 campaign, so the decisions made at the St. Louis convention became a touchstone after 1896. The Independent maintained an unshakeable faith in the trinity of silver, fusion and Bryan.[34] Much of the effort that went into justifying the 1896 policy was a polemical attack upon the "middle of the road" Populist faction. The dissident faction, which found most of its strength in the South, advocated ditching both silver and Bryan and returning to an independent campaign on the full Omaha Platform in 1900. One of the leading middle of the roaders was Paul Vandervoort from Omaha and the Independent singled him out for particular criticism.[35] The middle of roaders nominated their

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[33] "Adversity's Uses," ibid., January 12, 1896. Throughout 1897, the Independent was adamant in debunking the alleged "McKinley Prosperity." Its charges are born out by Charles Hoffman's study of the depression of the 1890's which found that 1897 was a low point exceeded in severity only by 1894. Charles Hoffman, "The Depression of the Nineties," Journal of Economic History, XVI (June, 1956), 137-164. James A. Barnes also confirms the fact that the "upturn" in 1896 was more apparent than real. Barnes, "Myths," pp. 383-393.

[34] See "Silver Still The Issue," Independent, February 4, 1897; "In Future Campaigns," ibid., February 3, 1898; "The Campaign of 1900," ibid., November 10, 1898; "Some Plain Talk," January 11, 1900.

[35] Ibid., June 11, 1896; October 8, 1896; Vandervoort is a curious figure who definitely should be researched further. The Independent referred to him as the head of two organizations: the National Reform Press Association, apparently a rival to the National Independent Press Association; and, the Industrial Legion, apparently designed as an urban auxilliary to the Populist Party. He is mentioned briefly in Durden, The Climax of Populism, pp. 97-98, 162, and Hicks, Populist Revolt, p. 380.

candidates for 1900 in 1898; to them, the fatal mistake in 1896 had been scheduling the Populist convention after the major party meetings; this time they could take no chances. The rump session in Cincinnati nominated Wharton Barker for President and Ignatius Donnelly for Vice-President. The Independent denounced the whole affair, saying "they are not the Peoples Party and cannot act for it."[36]

Despite the disaster of 1896 - the split of the Populist Party into a tiny rump group and a mainstream that was engulfed by the Democrats - the Independent maintained an optimistic view of the future. It saw an ever-rising silver movement across the country and, since only the Peoples Party stood wholeheatedly for that issue, it would certainly flourish.[37] A "new era" had dawned in national politics with the advent of the Peoples Party and its mission was to continue in the direction it had already charted. There would be no repudiation of the 1896 decisions. The Independent published numerous letters from readers supporting

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[36] "The Roaders Split," and, "The Cincinnati Meeting," Independent, September 8, 1898. Other attacks on the mid-road faction include: "Marion Butler," ibid., January 15, 1897; "The Kickers," ibid., February 11, 1897; "The Mid-Roaders," ibid., November 24, 1898; "The Omaha Agreement," ibid., May 25, 1899.

[37] "Where the Populists Will Gain," ibid., February 27, 1897; "Mission of the Peoples Party," ibid., March 4, 1897; "Why The Party Will Live," ibid., April 1, 1897; "Populism All Right," ibid., March 9, 1899; "Marching On," ibid., September 28, 1899.

that policy and assembled an impressive list of Populist leaders who concurred.[38]

In 1897 there was a temporary reassertion of Populist radicalism as the paper devoted the upper left-hand columns of its front page to a continuous series of articles on government ownership of the railroads, the telephones and the Postal Savings Bank scheme.[39] This phase passed quickly, however, and the paper returned to its sole emphasis on the free and unlimited coinage of silver. If anything, faith in this panacea increased during the terminal years of Populism. The demonetization of silver was seen as the "foundation stone of trusts;" regulation of loans and interests rates was inadequate. The only true reform was to increase the volume of currency. Double the currency and you would automatically halve the interest rates.[40]

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[38] Letters to the Editor, ibid., February-March, 1897. The Populist leaders supporting this position included James B. Weaver, William V. Allen, Marion Butler, William A. Peffer, and Silas A. Holcomb. The published list included seven Senators, ten Congressmen and five Governors.; ibid., March 11, 1897.

[39] Ibid., September-December, 1897.

[40] "Interest," ibid., December 1, 1898; "Overproduction Not The Cause," ibid., April 1, 1897; "Bryan and 16 to 1," ibid., February 17, 1898; "Our Money As It Is," ibid., April 28, 1898; "Money and Price," ibid., October 5, 1899.

In addition to the middle of the road defection, the movement was increasingly beset by charges of "socialism." The Independent found it necessary to emphasize, in a clearly defensive tone, the differences between Populism and socialism. Populism stood for public ownership of utilities only, while socialism sought common ownership of all property. During late 1898 and early 1899, there was a spate of editorials reiterating this theme.[41] The coup de grace for socialism, in the eyes of the Independent, was the common ground it shared with the "gold-bugs." Both criticized free silver and argued that overproduction was the cause of low farm prices.[42]

It remains problematical whether the paper's extreme sensitivity over this issue was due to attacks from the right or defections to the left. A very pointed 1899 editorial entitled "Make Up Your Mind" ordered those voters wavering between Populism and socialism to make their choice.[43] Certainly there were individuals who, recognizing the collapse of Populism as a political movement, began to drift toward the socialists. The Independent published a

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[41] "What is Socialism," ibid., June 25, 1896; "A Difference," ibid., January 5, 1899; "The Difference," ibid., February 2, 1899.

[42] "Socialist Statements," ibid., January 19, 1899.

[43] "Make Up Your Mind," ibid., May 4, 1899.

letter from Addison E. Sheldon, future historian of Nebraska, who pointed out the similarities between Populism and the program of the Haverhill, Massachusetts Socialists who had recently enjoyed political success.[44]

The Independent's optimism about the spread of reform sentiment had an underside of pessimism, as it saw the major parties stealing the Populist program. Particularly galling was the spectacle of the Republicans advocating various reforms, everything except the all-important money plank.[45] The frustration of defeat increased Populist paranoia on this issue as well as others.

The decline of Populism is intimately related to the rise of American Imperialism in the late nineteenth century and the Spanish-American War in particular. It is a generally accepted interpretation that the Populists were genuinely activated by the plight of the Cuban rebels. What remains problematical is the extent to which their interest in overseas struggles was due to their political frustrations at home.[46] It is also generally accepted that the Spanish-

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[44]Letter, Addison E. Sheldon, "What is Socialism," ibid., December 29, 1898.

[45]"It Is Coming," ibid., May 6, 1897; "Contain Populist Editorials," ibid., August 19, 1897; "Republican Populists," ibid., July 20, 1899.

[46]See Nugent, Tolerant Populists, p. 240.

American war was a diversion that effectively killed what was left of the Populist movement. The evidence of the Independent's response to the Cuban situation bears out this interpretation.

The paper's attitude toward the Cuban struggle is a genuinely pathetic story. As early as December, 1896, it expressed sentiment in favor of recognizing the rebels.[47] Highly partisan coverage of their struggle continued throughout 1897. As the crisis came to a head in 1898, the Independent began to use it for domestic political ends. It integrated its views on domestic problems with its views on Cuba and charged that the money interests were blocking American intervention on the side of the Cuban people. It found a natural harmony of interests between the despots of Wall street and the Spanish Monarchy.[48]

Following the sinking of the battleship Maine, the Independent attacked the McKinley administration for attempting to cover up the incident and of generally trying to evade the issue in hopes that it would die out.[49] Lack of concern for the Cuban people went hand in hand with lack of concern

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[47] "Recognition for Free Cuba," Independent, December 24, 1896.

[48] Editorial, ibid., February 3, 1898.

[49] "Maine, Spain, Cuba," ibid., March 3, 1898.

for the American people; the administration stood doubly condemned. With the declaration of war, however, the political tables were turned and the paper realized it immediately. It accused McKinley of planning to drag out the war in order to run for re-election in 1900 as a great war hero.[50] It cited an editorial in an Oregon Republican newspaper that blatantly talked of using the war to silence the reform movement.[51] Having attempted to use the Cuban struggle for political ends, the Independent found the situation suddenly reversed. Much has been made by some historians about the Populist affinity for conspiracy theories; it was the bitter frustration of the Spanish-American War that evoked this quality in the Independent.

The war overseas had its domestic counterpart in the struggle over the means of financing it. With the tables now turned, the paper saw the war as a money power plot to foist off interest-bearing bonds on the people. It demanded financing by Greenbacks, "the best form of currency we ever had," which it claimed had been responsible for victory in the Civil War.[52] With characteristic optimism, it saw the war

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[50]"War and Politics," ibid., April 28, 1898.

[51]Editorial from the Portland Oregonian, in, "Planning for Plunder," ibid., March 3, 1898.

[52]"The Greenbacks," ibid.

as a great opportunity to educate the American people on the money question.[53]

Disillusionment with the war came almost immediately and was quite intense. In the early weeks, the paper repeatedly stressed the humanitarian objectives: "The present war is not for conquest, but for humanity and Christian Civilization."[54] By the end of 1898 it was bitterly anti-imperialist, particularly over the Philippine expedition. Imperialism was equated with the ancient monarchies of Europe and termed a retrogressive development for human liberty.[55] It opposed the annexation of Hawaii and detected a plot to dismember China. Annexation, it argued, was a device to conscript the native Hawaiian population as contract slaves for American business interests.[56] The Open Door policy was an immoral collusion with England, the locus of the "money power."[57]

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[53]"Has a Silver Lining," ibid., June 9, 1898; "Bonds or Greenbacks," ibid., April 28, 1898; "Battle Against Bonds," ibid., May 5, 1898.

[54]"Lest We Forget," ibid., May 5, 1898.

[55]"Turn The Dial Back," ibid., May 25, 1898.

[56]"Hawaii Annexed," ibid., July 14, 1898.

[57]"Secretary Hay's Folly," ibid., April 5, 1900.

It was the bitterness of this experience -- a glorious crusade for humanity turned into a war for conquest and plunder -- that evoked, for the first time in the Independent, a nostalgic and sentimental image of the yeoman farm life. In a long editorial, the paper told of a Nebraska farm boy, raised in the free and independent atmosphere of the plains, seduced by false promises of liberty and glory, and sent to fight a sordid and despotic war in Asia. "Never again," it vowed.[58]

Politically, the Independent was put in an untenable situation by the war. It tried to argue that the war was not an issue in politics-economic issues still were -- while simultaneously attacking the administration's handling of the war. Further, it tried to oppose imperialism without opposing the war and seeming unpatriotic.[59] The war succeeded in crippling the Populist movement. Prophetically, in his next to last issue of the Wealth Makers, George Howard Gibson had warned against the consequences of foreign adventures.[60]

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[58] "A True Story of the Time," ibid., September 15, 1898.

[59] "Cost of Killing," ibid., May 26, 1898; Joint declaration to the voters from the state committees of the Populist, Democratic and Silver Republican Parties, ibid., October 20, 1898.

[60] "What Shall the Harvest Be?," Wealth Makers, January 2, 1896.

Imperalism served to focus attention on the question of international trade in which agriculture had a deep involvement. William Appleman Williams has recently published a book arguing that the midwestern agrarians were active expansionists and sought foreign markets as a solution to their economic problems.[61] Evidence in the Independent suggests the contrary, although its position of the subject was quite complex. In its most explicit and detailed discussion of the subject, the paper argued that America was self-sufficient and foreign markets were unnecessary. A more equitable distribution of the wealth would solve the domestic economic crisis, for the different producing classes would then be able to purchase each others' products: "Our people could all be prosperously employed in supplying each others needs and have practically no need of foreign commerce."[62]

At the same time, however, it implicitly acknowledged the importance of foreign markets in its attacks upon the

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[61] William Appleman Williams, Roots of the Modern American Empire, (New York: Random House, 1969). Williams' book suffers from an imprecise use of the terms farmers, agrarians, agricultural businessmen to include a wide variety of different economic interests. He includes major processors in the same group with small farmers. A far more accurate assessment of the situation is Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem."

[62] "The Foreign Market," Independent, February 10, 1898. See also, "Strange Non-Sequitur," ibid., April 6, 1899. The latter is a rebuttal to the expansionist arguments advanced by Brooks Adams.

McKinley administration. The rise in farm prices beginning in 1897 was due to the demand created by European crop failures, and not to the administration's policies.[63] This was a dangerous argument, for to admit the necessity of foreign markets was, willy nilly, to concede that American agriculture did suffer from overproduction. And that, to the bitter end, was still a heresy.

Developments in Russia at this time were of great interest to the paper and its response was not to urge more aggressiveness abroad, but more reform at home. Completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, it argued, would greatly improve the competitive position of Russian wheat on the international market. America could retain its advantage only by adopting a similar system of government owned railroads.[64] Thus, the Independent looked abroad only to find further justification for its time-worn reform program. Social reform was to serve the purpose of aiding the competitive advantage of the western agrarian entrepreneurs on the international market.

The old Populist creed of the producers was likewise adapted to the international scene. Debunking the idea

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[63] "The Rise in Prices," ibid., May 5, 1898; "Price of Wheat and Silver," ibid., August 19, 1899; "A Glance Over the Field," ibid., August 26, 1897; "Why Wheat is High," ibid., September 2, 1897.

[64] "Our Future Great Rival," ibid., June 15, 1899.

that exports were necessary for economic growth, the Independent argued that England was the wealthiest nation in the world and had achieved that position by always importing more than she exported.[65] In this naive formulation, the idea that wealth belongs to him who creates it was transformed into wealth is maintained by he who husbands it. To the end, the Independent held fast to the fundamentals of Populism.

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[65] "The Best News," ibid., September 21, 1899; also, "We Toil For Europe," ibid., January 11, 1900.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE OFFICIAL ORGAN OF NEBRASKA POPULISM

One cannot speak of the ideology of the official organ of Nebraska Populism, for that newspaper spoke with two distinct voices. Through most of the decade of the 1890's, it represented mainstream Populism, but for two years it expressed a Christian Socialist point of view. The case of the Alliance lends credence to Theodore Saloutos' warning that newspapers of the period were the personal organs of their owner-editors. To accurately represent the ideology of the Alliance, one must be sensitive to the changes in point of view that followed changes in management.

Under the editorship of Jay Burrows (1889-1892), the Alliance developed a point of view that conformed, politically and ideologically, to what most scholars agree was mainstream Populism.[1] Economically distressed farmers sought government action to relieve their problems of low

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[1]The consensus on mainstream Populism includes: Hicks, Populist Revolt; Woodward, Tom Watson; Shannon, Farmers' Last Frontier; Saloutos, Farmer Movements of the South; Nugent, Tolerant Populists; Durden, Climax of Populism; Destler, American Radicalism. Only Richard Hofstadter, Age of Reform, and Norman Pollack, The Populist Response stand, in different ways and in different degrees, outside this consensus.

prices for their produce, high railroad shipping charges and an acute mortgage crisis. They sought not to change the system, but to reform it by eliminating what they perceived as special privilege in order to restore the competitive position of the small entrepreneur. Their economic ideology was one of individualism and competition. As the movement developed into a national political party, with an interest in its self-perpetuation, it became willing to compromise part of its original program in a pragmatic effort to achieve political success.

George Howard Gibson (editor, 1893-1896), however, alloyed Populism with a heavy dose of Christian Socialism. Despite superficial similarities, the two movements were essentially antithetical. Whereas mainstream Populism sought to relieve acute economic distress, Christian Socialism was a moral reform movement. Gibson identified individualism and competition as the primary evils of the day, believing that they violated God's moral code and were, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, dangerous ideologies in the complex modern world. He sought to change not just the economic institutions of society, but the values that underlay them. Christian Socialism was a genuinely radical alternative to the prevailing ideologies of the period.

Gibson's deviation as editor of the paper is clearly evident from the continuity between the paper immediately prior to and immediately

following his tenure. Without missing a step, the new editor in 1896 picked up the silver issue which had been emerging in importance prior to Gibson's arrival in late 1893. While Gibson's paper, renamed the Wealth Makers, remained the official organ, it was quite unrepresentative of the movement, as is indicated by its opposition to the free silver panacea. Inevitably, conflicts arose between the paper and the movement which manifested themselves in the form of declining circulation and overt opposition from Populist leaders. Harrassed by these forces and suffering from disillusionment over the frustration of his own reform hopes, Gibson sold the paper and left the Populist movement.

An interesting and colorful figure, Gibson's role in the Populist movement was essentially peripheral, yet in this respect he helps define the outer limits of Populism. He represents that point where reformers, with different points of view, were attracted to and cooperated with the agrarian protest. The opposition he generated from within the movement and his subsequent departure indicate the instability of this coalition and helps establish the limits of Populist radicalism.

In terms of industrialism, the two voices of the Nebraska official organ responded very differently. Mainstream Populism, as represented by Jay Burrows' Alliance,

did not recognize the profound alteration of American society that was taking place. Its ideology of producer values posited a harmony of interests between the various small economic interests. The farmer, the small businessman and the industrial laborer needed only equal opportunity in the marketplace. The new development in society, in this view, was the emergence of the plutocrats as an artificial, non-producing class. Eliminate their special privileges, however, and they would disappear. The Alliance gave no indication of understanding the new position of the laborer in the industrial system and maintained a naive faith that the interests of the farmer and laborer were the same. Similarly, it did not perceive the declining position of the agrarian sector relative to the industrial. If Populism was the last stand of agriculture, the Populists themselves--if the Alliance is at all representative--did not see their movement in that light.

In a sense, mainstream Populism could not admit that any fundamental changes were taking place, for to do so would render irrelevant much of its political program and challenge its faith in the small entrepreneur. It drew values from an earlier age and sought to make the present era safe for them. It did not seek to turn the clock back, but only to eliminate what it saw as unnatural developments impeding the progress of America. It is the irony of the

late nineteenth century, as Theodore Saloutos suggests, that the agrarians proposed quasi-collectivist measures as a way of preserving competition, while the industrialists used a rhetoric of competition as they eliminated it in practice.[2]

Mainstream Populism sprung from particular economic circumstances and its perspective was necessarily limited by the self-interest of the groups involved. George Howard Gibson, as an intellectual and a Christian Socialist, looked at society with a far broader perspective. He perceived the changes being wrought by industrialism, particularly the dehumanization of men, the dependent status of labor and the declining position of agriculture. His critique, however, was not just of industrialism, but of the values of individualism and competition. Presumably he would have been just as critical of the proverbial Jeffersonian world which assumed the same values. The economic abuses of industrialism--monopolies, depressions, unemployment-- were the visible manifestation of the moral crisis of modern society. Gibson sought to transcend the present altogether, not by preserving an earlier era, but by introducing an entirely different set of values.

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[2]Saloutos, "The Agricultural Problem," p. 166.

George Gibson's ideology parallels remarkably the profile sketched by Norman Pollack in The Populist Response to Industrial America which he attributed to Populism as a whole. The common themes are a critique of individualism and competition, an awareness of alienation, a socialist outlook and a feeling that the 1890's were a major watershed in American history. Pollack's thesis that Populism was a genuinely radical alternative ideology is not sustained by an examination of the Alliance. His heavy use of this paper to support his thesis, in both The Populist Response and The Populist Mind, is selective and highly uncritical of their rhetoric. Indeed, he has violated his own sober injunction with which he ably criticized Richard Hofstadter:

> A discussion of this nature raises the problem of whether any study of intellectual history can disassociate thought from its embodiment in activity. To divorce the two seriously runs the risk of misunderstanding the thought under consideration, if it does not lead to its outright dismissal from the start. The ultimate test of intellectual history lies in its ability to specify the relationship between thought and action; otherwise, the role of ideas in history serves merely as the plaything of the historians' predilections.[3]

A careful analysis of the Populist program indicates that they were comfortably within the limits of the prevailing ideologies of the late nineteenth century. For a radical alternative, one must turn to something such as

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[3] Pollack, "Hofstadter on Populism," 488n.

Christian Socialism which, as the case of George Gibson indicates, maintained only a tenuous relationship to Populism.

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